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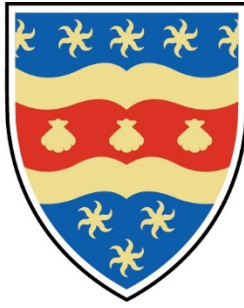
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The Representation of the Outlaw Biker in California, 1953-1969: Film, Counterculture and
Commodity

By
Stacey Masters

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree of

RESEARCH MASTERS

School of Humanities and Performing Arts

September 2020

Acknowledgements

I must express my sincere gratitude to Dr Jody Patterson, whose passion and infectiously enthusiastic attitude towards art history has inspired me for the past five years and will continue to do so. I am also hugely appreciative of my second supervisor, Dr Peter Bokody, for believing in the topic from the very beginning.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the profound patience of Nathan and Charlotte, along with my family, who not only tolerated what feels like hundreds of stress-filled phone calls, but instilled in me a fascination of motorcycling from an early age.

Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

This study was financed with the aid of government funding. A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included the taught modules MARE700 (17/AY/AU/M) and MARE703 (17/AY/AU/M) in Research in the Arts and Humanities.

Word count of main body of thesis:

24,774

Signed Stacey L. Masters

Date 1st September 2020

Abstract

My thesis is an exploration of the representation of the outlaw biker from 1953-1969. I will use three films to anchor my work: *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Wild One* (1953), *The Wild Angels* (1965). Each of these films will be the anchor of its own chapter, but I will also be using various imagery to explore the tensions surrounding the depictions presented, and subsequent social themes. Each film addresses different aspects of the biker, making them all important, therefore the thesis will be a visual exploration into the social and cultural history of the biker.

Easy Rider is the defining biker movie. Merging counterculture values with a cowboy themed outlaw biker image, this film defined both the mentality and imagery of what is associated with the biker lifestyle. A key addition to the New Hollywood cinematic movement, the film questioned the authoritative system by having the main characters killed by those who hold outdated values. *The Wild One* began the visual and cultural journey of the biker, by creating the leather-clad image of the outlaw motorcyclist for the foreseeable future and cultivating his masculinity through aggressive behaviour. Based on true events of the Hollister riot of 1947, *The Wild One* began the complex relationship between outlaw biker and the counterculture by presenting the main character as a beatnik, a precursor to the hippy. With the rise of the biker in popular culture in the 1960s, this proved to confuse ideological boundaries between the outlaw biker and the counterculture, especially concerning the Vietnam war. *The Wild Angels* was released during the peak popularity of the biker in America. With actual members of the Hells Angels starring in the film, and mimicking -- and sensationalising -- headlines of the time, it was aimed at teenage

audiences who craved shocking entertainment. Unfortunately for the female characters, this was often at their expense.

When discussing the wider visual realm of each chapter, I will cross reference manufacturer advertisements, newspaper and television stories, first hand accounts and documentary photographs with the films to highlight the importance of the image as culture industry. To complete my thesis, I will draw attention to the 1996 Guggenheim exhibition “The Art of the Motorcycle” and how corporate and institutional influence sanitised the visual history of motorcycling for the masses, commodifying the image of the outlaw biker. Since the history of motorcycling has been defined by images, the thesis discusses how the image has been appropriated numerous times, in different ways, for various reasons.

Contents

List of illustrations	vi
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction: The Power of the Image	1
Chapter One: <i>Easy Rider</i> and the themes of Motorcycling	16
Chapter Two: <i>The Wild One</i> and Masculinity	44
Chapter Three: <i>The Wild Angels</i> and Femininity	70
Conclusion: The Sanitisation of Motorcycle Culture's History	100
Bibliography	114
Appendix of Biker Movies	129

List of Illustrations

Chapter One

Figure 1, *Bonnie and Clyde* poster *TIME* magazine, 8 December 1967. Source: Time.com

Fig. 2, *Easy Rider* poster. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Fig. 3, Bill Ray, Hells Angel, 1965, 35mm.

Fig. 4, Bill Ray, Hells Angels have a stand-off with AMA officials, 1965, 35mm.

Fig. 5, The Levi's logo from 1885.

Fig. 6, Peter Fonda as Captain America, *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969. 6:57.

Fig. 7, A film still from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Directed by George Roy Hill, Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1969. 9:12.

Fig. 8, *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969. 54:01.

Chapter Two

Fig. 1, Marlon Brando as Johnny, *The Wild One*. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

Fig. 2, A poster advertising *The Wild One*. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

Fig. 3, Bill Ray, Hambone outside the AMA rally, where the Hells Angels are causing trouble with officials, 35mm, 1965.

Fig. 4, Barney Peterson, for "Cyclists Holiday," *LIFE*, July 21st, page 31, 1947.

Fig. 5, American Motorcycle Association Gypsy Tour award money clip for “Put Your Best Wheel Forward” campaign, 1961.

Fig. 6, Walt Axthelm talking with the press, photographer unknown, International Six Day Trials, 19-24 September, Bad Aussee, Austria, 1960. Source: AMA.com

Fig. 7, Harley Davidson advertisement, *Cycle*, December 1965, 22.

Fig. 8, The conflict between the Hells Angels and anti Vietnam protestors, Berkeley, California, October 16th 1965, photographer unknown, Bettman Collection.

Fig. 9, Hells Angels member Michael H. Walters is being taken by police after violent behaviour at an anti Vietnam protest, Berkeley, California, October 16th 1965, photographer unknown.

Fig. 10, photographer unknown, December 6th 1969, Altamont festival, Altamont Raceway Park.

Chapter Three

Fig. 1, The funeral of a Hells Angel member is held August 1968. Source: United Press International.

Fig. 2, An advertisement for *The Wild Angels*. Directed by Roger Corman, Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1966.

Fig. 3, Bill Ray, 1965, A Hells Angels with his “hanger-on,” 35mm.

Fig. 4, Bill Ray, 1965, Donna with Hells Angel members. 35mm.

Fig. 5, Ruthie repeatedly plays the same song after drinking all day, inside the Blackboard Cafe, taken by Bill Ray 1965.

Fig. 6, The cover of the EP for *Harley Davidson*, performed by Brigitte Bardot, written by Serge Gainsbourg, (Paris: Studios Barclay-Hoche Enregistrements) 10 December 1967. Cover artwork printed by Dillard et Cie. Imp. Paris.

Fig. 7, An advertisement for Triumph Motorcycles, 1965.

Fig. 8, An advertisement for Triumph Motorcycles, 1967.

Fig. 9, Three Motor Maids members with a photograph of Dot Smith, Linda Dugeau and Dot Robinson, photographer unknown, 16 January 2017.

Fig. 10, A collage of photographs of the Tracy Gear Jammers motorcycle club at the Hollister riot, 4 July 1947, photographer unknown.

Conclusion

Figure 1, An advertisement for Harley Davidson, 2017.

Introduction: The Power of the Image

“MYTH, LEGEND AND REALITY OVERLAP IN THE HISTORY OF THE BIKER”

1. Bill Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth: How the Original Cowboy of the Road Became the Easy Rider of the Silver Screen* (Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2005), 8.

What began as a research project of American New Wave cinema, soon became the exploration of the title, *The Representation of the Outlaw Biker in California, 1953-1969: Film, Counterculture and Commodity*, after discovering the fascinating phenomenon that is the history of motorcycle culture. Already familiar with some aspects of motorcycling, I investigated further into its origins. Interestingly, the role of images within motorcycle history is pivotal. So much so, that the entirety of motorcycle culture was constructed through a series of specific representations that form the basis of the following research thesis.

The Aims of this Thesis and My Contribution

Within this thesis I intend to analyse how motorcycles and their owners are represented in visual culture from 1953 until 1969, mainly in California. The thesis will be anchored by three cinematic depictions of the biker, *Easy Rider* (1969), *The Wild One* (1953) and *The Wild Angels* (1966), each film the focus of its own chapter. Each of these films hold distinctly different ideologies of the biker, therefore each chapter will address the implications of such representations, then comparing this to wider visual culture for comparison. For example, Johnny in *The Wild One* is portrayed as a character that displays beatnik attitudes

and values, that rebel against the social normality of the time,¹ which was a precursor to the counterculture of the following decade. Yet, by the 1960s, the biker image had been altered to be closer defined as an outlaw -- by running from the law following criminal acts - by American International Pictures, specifically in *The Wild Angels*. This depiction differs immensely from a later, countercultural version of the biker, that used prominent imagery of the cowboy, and sublime landscape associated with the 19th century American Old West, as shown in *Easy Rider*.² In order to compare these cinematic depictions to wider visual culture, I will show motorcycle manufacturer advertisements and how they present the typical motorcycle owner as a respectable middle-class white man (an example is shown on page 59). I will include television news reports and newspaper articles that have a distinct vision of what the motorcyclist wore, looked like, acted like and stood for, in order to acknowledge the pivotal role images have.

Comparing this unique group of visual imagery allows me to explore further into the layers of symbolism behind the motorcycle, explaining the importance of imagery with its culture. Furthermore, I will explain how the motorcycle and its owner have been appropriated and commodified numerous times throughout the twentieth century, ending the thesis with the discussion of the 1998 Guggenheim exhibition, *the Art of the Motorcycle*. In order to open up new ideas about why the motorcycle is now recognised as an icon in American history, I must begin at the very beginning of motorcycle culture in 1947, tracing its various depictions throughout the following twenty years. Motorcycle culture has been

1 The Cambridge dictionary defines 'Outlaw' as "a person who has broken the law and who lives separately from the other parts of society because they want to escape legal punishment."

'Counterculture' is defined as "a way of life and a set of ideas that are completely different from those accepted by most of society, or the group of people who live this way."

² D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010): 952.

acknowledged in academia in recent years, specifically within historical or media studies scholarship but, exploring motorcycle culture from an art historical perspective allows me to investigate the topic from a unique set of art historical paradigms.

This thesis will not only contribute to motorcycling academia, but also acknowledge areas of motorcycle culture that have never been discussed from an art historical perspective.

Motorcycle studies is a young area of research, with the only source for motorcycling academia being the International Journal of Motorcycle Studies, beginning in 2005.

Literature Review and Methodology: Art Historical Paradigms

The research I have undertaken has been with the intention of not only expanding my knowledge of varying representations of the motorcyclist within its context, but to understand the surrounding history of scholarship previously documented regarding motorcycle culture. Meaning, in short, who has written about motorcycle culture within the parameter of art history and therefore what ideas have already been communicated. From the chronology of documentation, I will thus compile what has been discussed in the past, leaving me with the opportunity to begin an original debate in the field.

The most challenging aspect of this project has been attempting to fit motorcycle studies within an existing art historical period of fine arts. Therefore, to keep the project on track I focused the content of the thesis on imagery regarding the topic at hand, similar to how the Smithsonian exhibition, *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the West* used visual studies and semiotics to critically assess a collection of images. My thesis takes mainly

cinematic depictions of the motorcyclist and introduces visual studies and iconography to make the link between motorcycle studies and art history. The motorcyclist was a prominent image within Pop Art of the 1960s, potentially bridging the gap between fine art and the biker, but unfortunately the scope of this project would not allow for the addition. It would, however, make an interesting exploration within a PhD topic. Another challenging part of this project was finding useful academic sources that discuss my area of research directly, since motorcycle studies is still an emerging field. Peter Biskind is a prime example of a source that I found useful but was limiting due to its lack of academic depth.

From my understanding, *Camera Politica* by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner is the comprehensive academic study of Hollywood film post 1967. The book acknowledges that films are “inseparable from the social history of the era”³ that they’re created in, which is key to my work, since the social atmosphere helped create the varying depictions of the biker in the three anchor films I will be discussing. Despite not discussing any of my three main films in detail, with the 1960s only contributing a small section of the book, it is useful for placing films within their socio-political surroundings through visual analysis, iconography and questioning ideologies behind depictions. A key quote that relates to this research project is as follows,

“...the political stakes of film are thus very high because film is part of a broader system of cultural representation which operates to create psychological dispositions that result in a

3 Douglas Keller, Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 7.

particular construction of social reality, a commonly held sense of what the world is and ought to be that sustains social institutions.”⁴

The specific representation of the motorcyclist has been altered numerous times, with this quote acknowledging the importance of depiction for constructing certain cultural associations for audiences. *Camera Politica* addresses how the New Hollywood movement pushed boundaries, taking advantage of newly loosened film regulations in 1966, and by acknowledging previously segregated genres; melodrama films for women, western films for men, that were being combined for the first time in order to question the accepted social order. The source has proved to be key for stating films as a form of visual studies, and for stating how the newer, more “socially conscious and stylistically innovative films”⁶ simply mirrored the societal changes of the decade, explaining their success and influence on cinema.

Although there are numerous documentations about the changes in cinema in the 1960s, one the most useful additions – although a limited source due to its academic nature – is by Peter Biskind, who wrote about American New Wave cinema and the huge shift that occurred between the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, with *Easy Rider* being one of the key examples. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* helped me to develop a much deeper understanding of the process of filmmaking previously to 1967 and therefore the immense difference low budget movies like *Easy Rider* had upon the industry. Before 1967, directors would have little to no creative input in the movies they were filming. Following the success

⁴ Keller, Ryan, *Camera Politica*, 14.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶ Ibid.

of low budget hits like *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967, the studio had lost its power to the filmmakers. Following the rise of teenage cinema audiences in the 1950s, a cinematic movement called American New Wave, or New Hollywood arose in the mid-1960s, finding that low budget movies adopting the notion of rebelling from social norms like the counterculture and the questioning of the authoritative system were hugely profitable. Filmed on a modest budget of \$375,000 and grossing \$50 million,⁷ *Easy Rider* was the epitome of small budget success.⁸ Biskind's book is convenient for placing *Easy Rider* within the New Hollywood movement. As his research is compiled of interviews with the cast and crew, he provides key information about the genesis of the movie and events during filming. Due to the number of movies that are included amongst the genre, the section where *Easy Rider* is discussed can only be useful to an extent. Also, Biskind's approach is media based with an incorporation of the social issues of the time, whereas I hope to use a variety of visual imagery and use art historical paradigms to analyse them within the social tensions of the 1960s.

As mentioned, there is a lack of sources that focus on motorcycle culture from an art historical perspective. The emergence of motorcycling culture has however, been documented by a handful of scholars in the field of history.⁹ Randy D. McBee's *The Rise of the American Motorcyclist*¹⁰ is one of the most extensive academic sources written about the history of motorcycling. Originating in 1947 when a small town in California called

⁷ Perlman, "The Brief Ride".

⁸ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generations Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 42.

⁹ The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies was the only scholarly source I managed to find regarding motorcycle history and culture. For more information see: <https://motorcyclestudies.org/>

¹⁰ Randy D McBee, *Born To Be Wild: The Rise of the American Motorcyclist*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-90, 127-152.

Hollister was overrun with drunken motorcyclists, the biker image was created by an allegedly staged photograph published in *LIFE* magazine. From this photograph, a short story published in *Harper's Bazaar* inspired the pivotal depiction of a motorcycle club in *The Wild One*. The 1953 movie emulated the behaviour in Hollister, making the events more shocking by merging all of the motorcyclists into one club. Following the movie, the biker has been an image surrounded by a fearful curiosity. Mentioning *Easy Rider* briefly, McBee's approach is a highly political one that fits the movie within the social atmosphere of the time. His work is an extremely useful source for understanding the relationship between motorcycle culture and the wider political atmosphere. However, I plan to take a more suburban perspective by using primary sources that would have been seen by the masses, instead of in-depth political analysis.

As this thesis will mainly consist of cinematic imagery regarding the motorcyclist, in order to remain an art historical research project, this thesis is predominantly a social history of film, using visual studies, feminism and iconography. Firstly, I must mention some key texts that theorise and analyse consumer culture that will contextualise my research. The following texts will be used to both anchor my writing whilst investigating the subliminal details of certain images. The writings of Theodor Adorno in regard to the "culture industry" adds a pivotal perspective to reflect upon the various representations of the motorcyclist. As my specific area of research takes place during a time of increased consumerism, Adorno's work adds an interesting perspective that -- only in this case when used in reverse -- can easily be applied to reflect examples of biker imagery targeting both upper and lower class audiences. Amongst imagery that would have been defined as "banal" by Adorno, there are examples of adverts used throughout the thesis to prove that the commodification of the motorcycle

existed in opposition to the violent, exaggerated depictions from Hollywood. The 1998 exhibition *The Art of the Motorcycle* that I will discuss in more depth to conclude the thesis uses Adorno's culture industry in contradiction to how initially intended, showing how the motorcycle was commercialised by an upper class, elitist art institution for the masses and successfully commodified the history of motorcycling as 'art'.

I must also acknowledge the immense power that images have, as discussed in the work of both David Freedberg and Roland Barthes. Within his writings, Freedberg declares that the image keeps the depicted moment alive, thus allowing this visual snapshot of time to be either appreciated or criticised.¹¹ Also, one of the key passages within *The Power of Images* that will play a fundamental role in my thesis is the relationship between image and reality. Not only is there a distinct difference between what an image represents and the reality behind said image, but once it is acknowledged that the depiction is separate from reality, the image becomes another "piece of reality"¹². All images have meaning, purpose, and a target audience, which is key within this thesis for examining imagery. In *Rhetoric of the Image* by Barthes, he examines advertisements in terms of connotation and denotation. The analysis of what is actually included in an image, and what is implied by an image is something that will be of extreme importance to my work. In imagery of the motorcyclist – mostly within advertising – there is a clear difference in connotation and denotation. For example, an image of the biker on the deserted highway denotes simply a motorcycle rider. Yet, the connotation is that the motorcycle rider is free from the pressures of urban society,

¹¹David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Theory and Response*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 338.

For more on Freedberg's theory of image, see: *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Theory and Response*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-27, 41-53, 246-282, 429-441.

¹² Ibid., 438.

an image that was commodified by motorcycle manufacturers and later, the Guggenheim.

This thesis in part will take a variety of visual sources and analyse them in a way that addresses their individual meaning, and their wider impact on the reality of motorcycle culture to reinforce the thesis as a social history of film.

Socio-cultural history is the fundamental basis to my work. My research topic is based upon 1960s visual culture surrounding the motorcyclist and therefore is impossible and would be of less impact to deny the importance of its social environment. Merging with iconology at times, social art history will be the gateway between the visual and the social atmosphere of the 1960s. I hope to create a unique argument to the literary sources explained above by using a combination of primary visual sources including the Bay area television archives, interviews with the Hells Angels, Bill Ray's documentary photographs of the Hells Angels from 1965, motorcycle manufacturer advertisements (mostly Triumph and Harley Davidson) and, despite not being a visual source, Hunter S. Thompson's 1967 book that documents – albeit a biased and most likely exaggerated version of -- his account of living with the Hells Angels. Social art history paired with visual analysis and iconology will be key during the second chapter to debunk the misunderstandings associated with certain imagery of both subcultures during the 1960s, complicated further with *Easy Rider*, where Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda are shown as “hippies on bikes”¹³.

Feminism is a fairly modern critical approach for dealing with art history. With feminism erupting across America in 1963 thanks to Betty Friedman's *the Feminine Mystique*, women's roles were finally being publicly called into question. Yet, there is a distinct lack of

¹³ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 3.

scholarship written about women's roles in motorcycle culture. Despite being difficult to find written sources regarding motorcycling that fits under the umbrella of feminism, this does leave me with a huge window of opportunity.

A small but valuable section of Allison Perlman's research article, "The Brief Ride of the Biker Movie", explains the typical ways women are depicted in cinematic representations of motorcycling. To give a simple example, "If they are not silently standing by their men, they are cavorting half-naked at one of their parties."¹⁴ She goes on to illustrate how female characters tend to represent the "straight" society that the outlaw gangs reject. The women within these movies either disrupt the plot by sexually distracting the male characters or end up victims of abuse by the male bikers. For the Hells Angels especially, the fellow men of the group are of significantly more important than any woman that chooses to live with the club. When applying Perlman's text to both *The Wild Angels* and *Easy Rider*, they coincide. All of the women in both movies appreciate the men's looks and have no deeper significance to the plot. Combining these cinematic depictions with primary visual sources of the females who lived with the Hells Angels gives a fresh perspective on the motorcycling narrative.

From looking at the visual sources, there is a strangely interesting tension surrounding women's experiences in motorcycling. 1960s biker movies where female outlaw clubs are central to the plot were released in the late 1960s, yet ironically, they tend to play into the male fantasy more than rebel against it. Another key aspect to femininity in motorcycle

¹⁴ Perlman, "The Brief Ride".

history that I intend to discuss is the achievements of those women who have never been celebrated alongside their male counterparts.

Laura Mulvey is one of the few writers that have discussed Hollywood depictions of women in depth. Her work often falls under the approach of visual studies, due to her focus of popular culture. She further explores the generic ways women are exploited visually within movies, and their impact -- or lack of -- on the plot. As Mulvey puts it, "Hollywood cinema was the 'case in point' for 'visual pleasure.'"¹⁵ Mulvey's work is unique as she uses films as a means of exploring themes of feminism. Due to the sources she uses and the way she dissects the visual elements of films, I wanted to include her within both feminism and visual studies. As her work was published in the 1970s, there is no discussion of biker imagery directly, but the way I plan to dissect movies and their subsequent imagery to analyse the elements within -- whether political, gender related or complexities with the counterculture -- is similar to Mulvey's technique. It is this methodology that makes her writing useful to my work. The movie as a medium is a visual source I plan to examine with this technique, by incorporating social art history specifically -- as Mulvey does with feminism -- to understand the visual imagery surrounding motorcycle culture.

Since film will be the medium of the thesis, I need a means to analyse sources not typically categorized as art. As previously mentioned, *Camera Politica* has been an extremely useful source for demonstrating the possibilities of using film as artwork within visual analysis.

Visual studies explores the connection between image and art, a theme extremely relevant to my -- heavily image based -- subject matter. I intend to use both social art history and

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1989).

feminism in conjunction with visual studies. I will achieve this by connecting both the movie with various journalistic photographs of the Hells Angels, along with advertisements and movie posters. The discussion of feminism will be heavily image based with a comparison to how women are briefly and often offensively represented in cinematic depictions. Visual studies is a perfect paradigm to explore this ideological construct by focusing my attention on visual imagery that ultimately created the motorcycle culture that is still present today.

Iconography and iconology will play a key part throughout the whole thesis, as the image of the motorcycle has become an iconographical symbol. An example of where this paradigm will be useful is in the representation of the outlaw biker and how this made the counterculture believe the Hells Angels to be their “protectors from the establishment”.¹⁶ Each film discussed has its own iconography of the motorcycle, and since *Easy Rider* is a movie that implies an extensive amount of politically and socially fuelled ideals, that will be ideally suited to iconology. I will be discussing the symbolism of landscape, the ironic use of the American flag (its use and understanding) and the characters’ clothing in an iconological way.¹⁷ In *Camera Politica*, it is discussed how—through social and political influences – film uses iconography by attaching meaning to visual attributes. For example, freedom is embodied within mid-Western landscapes in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). This can also be applied to my thesis as the open road has become a symbol for freedom in wider visual culture due to motorcycle imagery. The paradigm is truly unique as it is one of the easiest

¹⁶ John Wood, “Hells Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 37 (2003): 336.

¹⁷ I will explain further in chapter one, but the content I mention here has been discussed by Barbara Klinger: Barbara Klinger, “the Road to Dystopia,” in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 1997), 179.

paradigms to merge with other, more critical, approaches. For example, iconology can be used to discuss social art history through the analysis of specific attributes to an image.

Overview

The thesis is structured in an order that differs from the expected chronological order of the central films. This is because *Easy Rider* is the fundamental visual contribution to motorcycle history, therefore, I chose to include this at the beginning of the thesis in order to demonstrate the acknowledged history of motorcycling. Continuing, I will then contextualise this history by showing other key representations of the biker from both the 1950s and mid 1960s to show the stark differences. As each film adds a key aspect to the visual history of motorcycling, therefore each chapter will reflect this by exploring different associations the biker has in film and wider visual culture. To end the thesis, I bring the timeline forward to the 1990s, where the narrative of the biker is once again rewritten, this time by imagery collected and displayed by the Guggenheim. The exhibition *the Art of the Motorcycle* takes the thesis back to the original point, that motorcycle culture is subject to specific appropriation that differs from reality, exactly as *Easy Rider* did with the merging of counterculture values and the outlaw biker image.

In chapter one, I will contextualise *Easy Rider's* place within motorcycle culture by exploring the filmmaking process and its place within New Hollywood, alongside its visual roots from the American old west. As the grounding aspect of motorcycling imagery, the romanticism of the frontier is what made motorcycle culture a lifestyle, continuing to this day. The imagery of the western film -- specifically visible with landscape and celebrating national heritage -- is fundamental to motorcycling and has been acknowledged in numerous

motorcycling articles, therefore this chapter will include a continuation of examining key academic sources.

Within chapter two, I will discuss how the masculinity that underpins motorcycle culture began in visual terms. Using Marlon Brando's role in *the Wild One* as a foundation, I will further explore how the visual complexities between the outlaw motorcyclist and the counterculture of the 1960s began, with the beatnik values expressed by Brando. Often associated with one another for rejecting social norms, I will explore what the counterculture connection was for the Hells Angels. By examining *The Wild One's* role in motorcycle culture, I will discuss the later similarities and striking differences between the two subcultures as shown in wider visual culture. Delving into both subcultures' core values, including nationalism and individuality, I will address the contradictions within imagery of the decade.

In the final chapter, I will discuss women within motorcycle culture. Despite second wave feminism erupting in the same decade as the outlaw biker reaching peak celebrity status, women's rights are interestingly given minimal attention in motorcycling. Here, there is an opportunity to learn about the cultural and social environment of the sexes and their interactions. There are limitations within this project, which include attempting to understand and explain the lived experience of those involved in my area of research. However, primary sources including interviews and photographs of women who rode with the Hells Angels in the 1960s, along with analysis of *The Wild Angels* will help to explore this relationship. In interviews I have watched, the women who are denied membership into

outlaw clubs because of their gender decide to stay because of their love of motorcycles.¹⁸

This poses the all-important question of, why? The allure and fascination with motorcycle culture will be a key element to both this chapter in particular and to my thesis as a whole.

¹⁸ For instance, a woman who rides with the Hells Angels named Donna McLain repeatedly explained her love for the club because of the bikes, despite saying “if I do anything wrong, I get pushed around,” implying questionable actions towards the women riding with the club. CBS News, 1965. - <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6dhiue>

“BY THIS TIME, THE AMERICAN DREAM HAD BEEN REVEALED AS A DREAM.”

1. Ted Polhemus, *The Art of the Motorcycle*, (New York: Guggenheim, 1998), 48.

*Easy Rider*¹⁹ was the pivotal moment in motorcycling history. Throughout this chapter I will outline the film’s importance in cinema and the wider social implications of its content. The 1969 movie is one of the key examples of New Hollywood, a movement that redefined cinema. Within the first half of this chapter, I will use accounts of the cast and crew to explain the motivations for making *Easy Rider* and how it became such a success. In order to ground the entire thesis, I will list and examine the themes exhibited within *Easy Rider* as these were also commonly used to push the motorcycling narrative throughout popular culture. *Easy Rider* was a culmination of western themes that I will analyse in the second half of this chapter, and despite ending the biker movie genre, proved to be essential in creating motorcycling as we know it today.

Before I undertake the main section of this chapter, I feel it necessary to mention the underpinning theme and aims of the 1991 exhibition, *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*,²⁰ as the motivations for the exhibition are incredibly similar to my own research and thesis. The exhibition opened at the Smithsonian, triggering a nationwide discussion about questioning representation. Possibly one of the most controversial art exhibitions to date, the collection of images and accompanying information in *The West As*

¹⁹ *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969.

²⁰ William H. Truettner ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, (Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution, 1991),

America initiated a revisionist dissection of old western depictions, that had previously not been academically questioned on such a scale. The foundation of the exhibition is a similar concept to my thesis. Despite being a limited source, Robert Hughes eloquently explains in his review of the exhibition that, “religious and national myths are made, not born; their depiction in art involves much staging, construction and editing, under the eye of cultural agreement.”²¹ The romanticism of the American west played a fundamental role in the rise and lasting fame of the outlaw motorcyclist, with various representations throughout a pivotal twenty year period constructing a specific, often idealistic version of the reality of motorcycle clubs like the Hells Angels. It is almost certain that these popular culture references in turn shifted the way these outlaw bikers presented themselves to the world, further fueling the outlandish representations in movies.²²

The curators of the Smithsonian exhibition intended to demonstrate that the reality of the old west was not necessarily as pictured within the paintings celebrating such ideological themes as Manifest Destiny and westward expansion, that initially resulted in a specific national iconography and perception of the Country’s founding. The fact that this national discussion did not begin on a scale this large until 1991 explains why the motorcyclist was a phenomenon so curious to the masses within midcentury America. Elements of the western film and the motorcyclist have been glorified by popular culture since 1953, with the release of *The Wild One*, in the same way that hundreds of depictions of westward expansion ignore social injustices and violent behaviour. In a similar way to the Smithsonian exhibition, this

²¹Robert Hughes, “How the West Was Spun: A Big Controversial Show in Washington Stirs Revisions of Frontier Art,” *TIME*, May 13, 1991, 79.

²² Sonny Barger, and Zimmerman, Keith and Kent, *Hells Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 26.

thesis, along with academics beginning to take notice of motorcycle culture, the dissection of the history of both motorcycling itself and its use in mainstream popular culture has begun.

In a similar way that the open road is considered part of the American national identity, *The West As America* attempts to explore the ways paintings contributed to the national iconography of modern times. The opening of the exhibition came at a time of political prosperity for America. Since 1945, political tensions between America (along with other Western capitalist countries) and the Soviet bloc – that became known as the Cold war -- meant the threat of nuclear war was possible at any time. The same year that these tensions dissolved with the demolition of the Berlin wall, many were deeply offended that an exhibition -- on the National Mall especially²³ -- encompassed a perspective that challenged the accepted patriotic narrative of the west. *The West As America* can be used as an interesting source when discussing nationalism too, although I will explore this further within the second chapter. A similar practice can be applied to motorcycle culture, for example why did Bill Ray -- with the knowledge that they would be published in *LIFE* magazine and be seen by approximately six million weekly readers²⁴ -- take certain photographs of the Hells Angels? Why did production companies decide to advertise the motorcyclist as a violent social outcast? Furthermore, why did advertisements show the motorcyclist in such a strikingly different way, one that represented the motorcyclist as a respectable citizen? No image is a true representation of reality, with social influences and hidden motives fueling the positioning and exhibiting of all visual imagery. In the case of the

²³ I make this connection since the National Mall in Washington DC is considered a highly symbolic area of land, that embodies the Country's founding values. Therefore, to have an exhibition highlighting the graphic nature of westward expansion in a location visible from the Capitol, would be offensive to many.

²⁴ James L Kauffman, *Selling Outer Space: Kennedy, the Media, and Funding for Project Apollo, 1961-1963*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 73.

motorcyclist, there are various reasons why the motorcyclist was shown as both a criminal outlaw, and a member of the counterculture.

Part One: *Easy Rider*'s Cinematic Presence in New Hollywood

As mentioned in the introduction, American New Wave was a cinematic movement that altered movie processes forever. Previously to the mid-1960s, all creative influence lay with the studio sponsoring the film. Musicals and family friendly content dominated both cinema and television, with the youth being almost entirely unrepresented.²⁵ It was not until the incredible success of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 -- despite many harsh reviews from critics -- that studios began to take notice of the financial potential for youth oriented cinema.

Taking inspiration from French New Wave,²⁶ the American alternative -- which later became known as New Hollywood -- used social taboos and content considered outrageous for the time in order to generate ticket sales of a younger audience. There are common themes with certain movies released during mid to late 1960s that define them as New Hollywood. Protagonists that exhibit violence (that is often graphically shown), drug taking, swearing and openly addressing social taboos are some of the obvious examples. There is often nudity, mainstream popular music and even death of main characters. The protagonists are usually opposing an authority figure, which is key when examining *Bonnie and Clyde* as the authority figures are law enforcement, usually seen as protection.²⁷ These main characters

²⁵ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generations Saved Hollywood*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 29.

²⁷ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2002), 83.

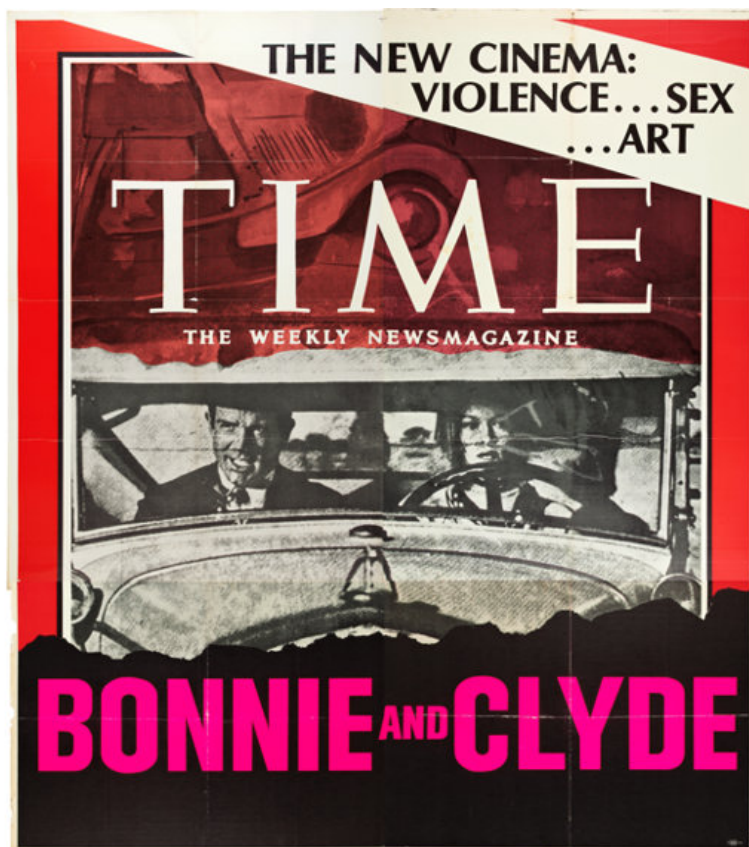
will often be coming of age and therefore be relatable for the audience, struggling with expectations placed on them by society or an authority figure, as shown in *The Graduate*. This new type of story seemed long overdue judging by audiences' reactions. When the first screening of *Bonnie and Clyde* ended, there was a long silent pause before the audience erupted in cheers, proving that the refreshing twist on a story told many times was what American cinema needed.²⁸

These movies were conceptualised by a few people, often the director and the producer.

The budget given by the studio -- due to the scandalous nature of the content -- was usually

minimal, often below

\$400,000. The lack of financial support meant experimental filming techniques and crew doubling up as actors was common. This new visual style was a breath of fresh air for younger audiences, created in a more spontaneous way, like an artwork rather than a meticulously planned studio production with modern filming and sound equipment.



Bonnie and Clyde movie poster on the cover of *TIME* magazine, 8 December 1967.

²⁸ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, 37.

It is key to note here how numerous movies within the drive-in circuit (during the 1950s) were released celebrating beatnik values and themes.²⁹ These films that also celebrated young protagonists discovering their place in society, often within unusual and tense situations.³⁰ Also, no matter how rebellious the protagonists were of these movies, even in *The Wild One* (as I will explain in the following chapter) the main character will always reflect upon his behaviour with regret and then conform to societal standards once again. One major difference is the art and filmmaking that was created amongst the beat generation was rarely given public attention, focusing specifically on younger audience members. Yet, with New Wave trends only bursting into the public eye in the late 1960s, it altered the way movies would be conceptualised and executed for the foreseeable future because of its success with the youth.

Produced for around \$300,000, *Easy Rider* made over \$50 million.³¹ The Cannes film festival of 1969 created the 'best film by a new director' category specifically to award Dennis Hopper, and the immense success came as a surprise to most of those creatively involved.³² Addressing previously undiscussed themes of violence, prejudice and social discrimination, along with featuring explicit drug use and swearing, *Easy Rider's* content alone was courageous for its time, placing it firmly within the New Hollywood movement. Dennis Hopper saw an opportunity to create visual entertainment that focused on elements young people wanted to see and relate to, such as the questioning of what it means to be free

²⁹ John Wood, "Hells Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 37 (2003): 337.

³⁰ Steven Joseph, *Movies and American Society*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 209.

³¹ Barbara Klinger, "the Road to Dystopia," in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 1997), 179.

³² Biskind, *Easy Riders*, 74.

amongst a commodity fuelled society. The notion of the protagonists questioning the values of the American system was not only a unique perspective for filmmaking, but also a mindset that was significant for many young people who opposed America's involvement in the fight against communism in Vietnam and desperately wanted to separate themselves from previous generation's traditions.

Easy Rider used New Hollywood themes so successfully that it virtually ended the biker movie genre -- an extensive amount of films focused on shocking audiences with often offensive content, that I will discuss in more depth throughout this thesis -- and ultimately altered the way the outlaw motorcyclist was presented in popular culture. This was accomplished by *Easy Rider* encompassing themes commonly associated with the outlaw motorcyclist yet addressing them in a way that made the motorcyclist a martyr. New Hollywood celebrated protagonists living against society's expectations, with *Easy Rider* portraying Hopper and Fonda as outlaws but in a, "reflective, even highbrow"³³ way, and even ending the movie with the pair being murdered by two strangers. Martin Rubin -- who will be a key source later in this thesis -- perfectly addresses the way *Easy Rider* fits into the complex world of 1960s cinema. He describes the film as a "synthesis of biker/exploitation and New Hollywood/art film ingredient, absorbing biker mythology into a countercultural context."³⁴

The original concept of *Easy Rider* came from a film still of two outlaw motorcyclists from *The Wild Angels* riding alongside each other. Peter Fonda pitched a film -- then titled *the Loners* -- to Dennis Hopper where two bikers ride across America on their choppers, only to

³³ Bill Osgerby, "Sleazy Riders" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31 (2003): 105.

³⁴ Martin Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR: Cultural confusion and the biker film cycle" *New York* 6 (1994): 372.

get “shot by a couple of duck hunters”³⁵. Hopper jumped at the opportunity to direct a biker film, and Fonda was excited to reinvent the role that he had become known for in *The Wild Angels*. The atmosphere on set -- from experiences documented³⁶ -- was disorganised, tense and usually drug fuelled. An example of this took place during the filming of the Mardi Gras scenes. Columbia studios’ Bert Snieder agreed to give Hopper and the crew a certain amount of the movies’ budget in order to film all the New Orleans footage on 16mm cameras. This would be a test as to whether the movie was suited to the studio, and whether it would be successful. The entire cast and crew missed Mardi Gras due to the incorrect dates being noted (marijuana induced), an argument between Hopper and Fonda took place during the filming of the acid trip scene and numerous members of the crew believed they were directing the film, leading to people quitting the entire production.³⁷ After returning to Los Angeles with the footage, Fonda and one of the crew members offered to return the money (\$20,000) to Snieder due to Hopper’s erratic behaviour during filming. Those who heard the rumours about tensions filming *Easy Rider* doubted it would be a success. The overwhelming reaction baffled Hollywood, proving that younger audiences were overjoyed at finally being heard.

The New Hollywood movement pioneered experimental editing. The filmmaking and editing of *Easy Rider* ought to be recognised as unique from that of its New Hollywood counterparts. The content of the film was significant to say the least, but the individual shots are what makes the plot powerful. The impressive sweeping shots of the pair riding on

³⁵ Matthew Drutt ed., *The Art of the Motorcycle*, (New York: Guggenheim, 1998), 65.

³⁶ Charles Kiselyak, *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage*, Columbia TriStar, 1999. 5:30-10:12.

³⁷ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, 63.

isolated roads in itself created an entirely new genre of film: the road movie.³⁸³⁹ The short, choppy editing of the acid trip scene⁴⁰ was the first of its kind, with the addition of repetitive and broken sound clips to disorient the viewer, allowing the audience to experience the anxiety and confusion of the effects of the drug along with the characters on screen. The light flares make the film feel raw, even hypnotising at times. The fading between focus and blurred shots, along with slowly filmed close ups of the bikes⁴¹ is a clear indicator of the romanticism of riding. This revolutionary style of editing meant the camerawork could aid in telling the story.

Despite both Hopper and Fonda declaring that *Easy Rider* was not an anti-Vietnam movie⁴², the content of the movie implies certain moral questioning of America as a whole, as “Hollywood has often been an unwitting recorder of national mood”⁴³. Within the opening scene, the audience sees a powerful shot of the money hidden within the gas line of Fonda’s bike, ironically decorated with stars and stripes. Similar to *Bonnie and Clyde*, the audience supports the protagonists despite their crimes and, in *Easy Rider*, how Hopper and Fonda sell drugs at the beginning of the movie. In many depictions, these acts would make the character the antagonist, whereas, in New Hollywood, these characters are questioning the morals of society in general, making their crimes just. The movie was released in 1969, which was the end of possibly the most complex decade of the twentieth century. The

³⁸ Klinger, “the Road to Dystopia,” 181.

³⁹ Additions to the road movie include; *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), *Mad Max* (1979) and its sequels, *Rain Man* (1989), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), *Little Miss sunshine* (2006).

⁴⁰ *Easy Rider*, 1:22:41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6:21.

⁴² Kiselyak, *Easy Rider*, 14:20-14:37.

⁴³ Peter C. Rollins, *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 1.

tensions between age groups is demonstrated -- of course filled with implications of Vietnam -- through the choice of music, clothing and drug use of the main characters. They are met with opposition at every turn by older generations who reject the bikers' appearance and mode of transportation, eventually being killed by people who supported this discrimination.

Part Two: *Easy Rider's* Western Contextual Presence

Within this section of the chapter I will highlight the prominent themes displayed within *Easy Rider*, and how these were similar to other imagery of motorcycle culture in the 1960s. Within the western film theme that is vital to the iconography of motorcycling, I will discuss the following subcategories that are all prominent and linked to the American frontier; the notion of freedom, the cowboy, the frontier and finally, commenting on American values, which in the case of the 1960s, incorporates the height of commodity culture. I will use several important sources that have been of incredibly importance to my research to reinforce these topics' credibility.

Possibly the foundational element of motorcycling is the concept of being 'free'.⁴⁴ This definition alters depending on individual's perspectives, but in the case of *Easy Rider*, freedom is conveyed through living free of time constraints -- as declared when Fonda throws his watch at the ground at the beginning of the movie -- and within nature. Escaping social constraints is also a common thread in *Easy Rider*, as it is accepted by the main characters that modern America is no longer a free Country. The very first movie poster for

⁴⁴ Hopper even confirms this in *Easy Rider* when he says, "what's wrong with freedom man? That's what it's all about." *Easy Rider*, 1:10:18.

Easy Rider reads the tagline, “A man went looking for America, but couldn’t find it anywhere,” signifying the landscape untouched by civilisation is the only place you can truly feel free. Prejudice seems to only occur when the pair are in towns and cities, with the scenes of the pair riding through the untouched landscape signalling hope and reinforcing this idea of freedom.



A movie poster for *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Living outside the accepted social system and creating their own set of rules, the Hells Angels were angry and notorious easy riders of the California streets. One of the key visual sources for my project captures this idealised version of freedom that is associated with the outlaw biker. Photographer Bill Ray took a series of documentary images of the Hells Angels in 1965. Interestingly, Ray released a book specifically to exhibit the images taken of the club, which was one of only three photography books documenting his career. Named *Hells*

*Angels of San Berdoo '65: Inside the Mother Charter*⁴⁵, the book is comprised of the photographs intended to be published in *LIFE* magazine in 1965. Ray and reporter, Joe Bride, lived with the outlaw motorcycle club for several months, capturing numerous meetings, interactions and powerful snapshots that show the intense divide between 'straight citizen' and outlaw. According to Ray's book, "flipping the bird" is "probably the one single gesture that sums up the attitude and contempt the Angels had for the outside world"⁴⁶. Furthermore, the photographs are a fascinating insight into the lifestyle and inner workings of the club, that was otherwise fictionalised and exaggerated in movies like *The Wild Angels*

⁴⁵ Bill Ray, *Hells Angels of San Berdoo '65: Inside the Mother Charter*, (San Francisco: Blurb, 2010), 4-75. The full e-book can be found here: <http://www.billray.com/2011/01/18/hells-angels-of-san-berdoo-65/>

⁴⁶ Ray, *Hells Angels*, 38.

(which I will examine in chapter three). Ray described certain situations as “exhilarating and terrifying at the same time,” which from wider research, seems to be an accurate representation of life with the Hells Angels. The photograph below is one of the most poignant of the Hells Angels, perfectly depicting the romanticised freedom felt by outlaw bikers’ lifestyle. In a shot that perfectly encompasses the divide between the ‘free’ outlaw biker and straight citizens, the Hells Angels stand off against an American Motorcycle Association representative who wears a strikingly white shirt (in comparison to the club members who, of course are wearing all black). As I will discuss in much more depth in the following chapter, the AMA essentially created the outlaw biker when they ‘outlawed’ the motorcyclists that refused to follow regulations, labelling them the “one percent” of



Hells Angel balancing on motorcycle, taken by Bill Ray 1965.

riders.⁴⁷ The photograph here is taken following over a decade of bitterness of this rejection, with the Hells Angels protesting outside an AMA event.⁴⁸ The Hells Angels adopted the term 'one percenter' and proudly wore a patch of the same declaration, embracing their rejection of the accepted motorcycling rules, in a sense declaring their freedom from the rules.⁴⁹ Returning back to the idea of the American frontier, Ray's photographs perfectly embody the wildness and 'freedom' of the Hells Angels' lifestyle, along with the brotherhood of the club and the way they reject the accepted rules (both society and the AMA), which are all factors of the frontier hero's persona.

Hells Angels have a stand-off with AMA officials outside a rally, near Bakersfield, taken by Bill Ray 1965.



⁴⁷ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 3.

⁴⁸ Ray, *Hells Angels*, 43-44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

For an undisclosed reason, the article and subsequent photographs were never published in *LIFE* magazine as intended. Judging from the extensive negative press the Hells Angels were receiving at the time, I believe that the article would have been popular -- regardless of the light the outlaw club were shown in -- due to the fascination stirred by various popular culture depictions. Following his time with the Angels in 1965, Ray expresses his view on why the outlaw motorcyclist -- in particular *Easy Rider*'s characters -- became a key moment America's cultural history. The origin of the biker phenomenon played on the nostalgic notion of freedom instilled with reminiscing of the Country's founding to strike the imagination of the American public.⁵⁰ *Easy Rider* is the perfect example of this, which is one of the reasons it is believed to be, "literally a legend in its own time".⁵¹ Ray connects the motorcyclist to Western culture perfectly by saying,

"There's a romance to the idea of the biker on the open road," Ray says. "It's similar to the romance that people attach to cowboys and the West — which, of course, is totally out of proportion to the reality of riding fences and punching cows. But there's something impressive about these Harley-Davidsons and bikers heading down the highway. You see the myth played out in movies, like *Easy Rider*, which came out a few years after I photographed the Angels. You know, the trail never ends for the cowboy, and the open road never ends for the Angels. They just ride. Where they're going hardly matters. It's not an easy life, but it's what they choose. It's theirs. And everyone else can get out of the way or go to hell."⁵²

⁵⁰ D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010): 943.

⁵¹ Klinger, "the Road to Dystopia," 179.

⁵² Ben Cosgrove, "LIFE Rides with the Hells Angels, 1965," *TIME*, 8th November 2014.

The outlaw motorcyclist is the modern day cowboy.⁵³ Both in media coverage of the Hells Angels and popular culture depictions as in *Easy Rider*, the outlaw biker's rugged appearance, volatile behaviour and lifestyle choices stirred America's imagination. The cowboy aesthetic is dominant in *Easy Rider*, with Hopper's outfit comprising of cowboy boots and hat, with a suede fringe jacket, satchel and suede trousers. Fonda's outfit is also a key ingredient of *Easy Rider's* success, but his stars and stripes attire are the modern version of Hopper's traditional -- and quite literal -- cowboy outfit. Even the characters names reflect Western history. Fonda is named after Wyatt Earp, a known gambler and lawman who often dealt with unruly cowboys.⁵⁴ Hopper is called Billy, of course paying homage to Billy the Kid's notorious life of crime and running from law enforcement.⁵⁵ It is almost like Hopper and Fonda are shown as modern cowboys running from the law on their motorcycles/horses,⁵⁶ also meeting their death in a similar way to most western film heroes, by shooting. This fatal end is brought into the twentieth century by incorporating a modern enemy to those living against social expectations, "hippy hating townspeople."⁵⁷ Also, Hopper and Fonda's deaths are symbolic of public figures who met the same fate after instigating change throughout the 1960s, like Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.⁵⁸ This play on the western genre -- leading numerous movies to be labelled as "biker-westerns" --

⁵³ Wood, "Hells Angels," 348.

⁵⁴ Steven Lubet, *Murder in Tombstone: The Forgotten Trial of Wyatt Earp*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 27.

⁵⁵ Charles A. Siringo, "A True Sketch of 'Billy the Kid's Life,'" in *The Billy the Kid Reader*, ed. Frederick Nolan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 60.

⁵⁶ Vincent Canby, "Roger Corman: A Good Man Gone to 'Pot'," *New York Times*, 18 September 1966, 133.

⁵⁷ Wood, "Hells Angels," 338.

⁵⁸ Quart, Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, 94.

is a possible reason why the biker movie genre was so successful,⁵⁹ since the western movie genre spans decades and is one of the most successful in history.⁶⁰

The stylistic similarities between clothing of the cowboy in the western genre and what was worn by the outlaw motorcyclist -- in this case, the Hells Angels -- is also key. What has become a fashion style of its own, the outlaw motorcyclist's attire -- that I will discuss in more depth within the second chapter in relation to the counterculture -- includes leather, denim, fringing and relaxed fitting



The original Levi's logo in 1885.

clothes (that are often dirty), within their everyday wear.⁶¹ Even the choice of Levi's jeans is linked, as the company began by making workwear suited to the harsh climate of the frontier. The branding of the two horses, held by a cowboy on each side, attempt to pull the jeans apart, is to demonstrate the strength of the denim.⁶² The popularity of Levi's jeans is noted, but since the Hells Angels chose to proudly wear Levi's -- as can be seen in Ray's photographs -- is an interesting link to the old western origins that became modern America's lifestyle.

⁵⁹ Wood, "Hells Angels," 337.

⁶⁰ Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume Two*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1972): 140.

⁶¹ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 946.

⁶² The full history of the Levi logo can be found here: <https://www.levistrauss.com/unzipped-blog/2011/07/01/two-horses-many-versions-one-message/> Last visited 28/05/19.

The cowboy, the outlaw, the vigilante and the biker all reject mainstream society and conform to no rules aside the ones they impose on themselves.⁶³ Accompanied with the freedom shown in both western movies and the likes of *Easy Rider* that has represented motorcycle culture for the last fifty years, are an idealised representation. This -- to the viewer -- is presumably why both themes became so popular within American society (especially within the rise of commodity culture in the late 1950s and 1960s) as this sense of adventure seemed unattainable. The lifestyle labelled as 'free' by capitalism was being exposed as controlled by consumerism and office jobs, making the outlaw biker a fascinating concept as his lifestyle appeared to be truly free.

It would be impossible to discuss the connotations of the cowboy in motorcycling imagery -- specifically in *Easy Rider* -- without mentioning the landscape that accompanies him. The open road is the outlaw biker's frontier, visually documented extensively throughout popular culture, especially in *Easy Rider*. As explored in Barbara Klinger's essay *The Road to Dystopia*, *Easy Rider* inspired an entire new type of film: the road movie. The reliance on western iconography -- typically vast midwest landscapes -- is one of the possible reasons why the notion inspired an extensive number of similar movies, since this imagery is central to the country's iconography. These landscape shots are the most recognisable in *Easy Rider*. This typically American theme of frontierism ironically relates to how Hopper and Fonda travel across America Eastwards -- opposite to the traditional route that settlers took from east to west -- to symbolise the closing of the frontier. The notion of a travelling west to find freedom was no longer attainable or realistic, with this journey of 'looking for

⁶³The Hells Angels are a perfect example of this, as they reject the accepted social traditions and instead have their own set of rules that all members must abide.

America' acknowledging the discrimination and inequality between belief systems, races, genders and classes across America, therefore demonstrating the inaccuracy of the American Dream.⁶⁴

Another key element of *Easy Rider* that links the landscape to the western genre is the use of music. As another element of New Hollywood merging with the western film, popular songs are used as a tool to inspire certain emotions during landscape scenes, therefore and the plot. For instance, the opening of the movie -- accompanied with the upbeat music of Steppenwolf's *Born to Be Wild*⁶⁵ -- where the characters are first embarking on their journey, the mood is uplifting with the camera shots emphasizing the freedom felt on the open road. In an article by *Classic Rock* magazine, *Easy Rider* is described as "a hazy blur of motorbike existentialism", with *Born to Be Wild* becoming the "unofficial biker anthem"⁶⁶. The song was originally inspired by the freedom felt by Steppenwolf's front man after he could finally afford to buy his own car, linking also to the cultural significance of riding or driving on highways. Although not directly related to motorcycles, the song became the musical emblem for freedom on the open road.

Not only an ingenious idea for drawing in a younger audience, the choice to use a variety of popular rock songs in the movie accentuates the truly American themes throughout.

⁶⁴ The Cambridge dictionary defines the American Dream as "the belief that everyone in the U.S. has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard." *Easy Rider* calls into question the notion that everyone is entitled to equal opportunities by showing America as a flawed Country in terms of equality.

⁶⁵ *Easy Rider* was in fact, the second movie to include popular music from the time. The first was *Scorpio Rising* (1963). The choice to use pop music is a powerful tool for not only examining the cultural interests of those making the movie, but also how these songs reflect emotions conveyed; e.g. "If 6 was 9" by Jimi Hendrix is the pivotal moment where Wyatt and Billy enter New Orleans come closer to their demise.

⁶⁶ 'Sleazegrinder', "Born To Be Wild: The Steppenwolf Story", *Classic Rock*, August 20th 2017.

Addressing what is popular at the time, the movie is successfully placed within its social context, and commenting on such through musical contributions. The use of popular music - in the case of *Easy Rider*, *Born to Be Wild* by Steppenwolf -- with frames of the sublime American landscape have become a common addition to American themed imagery, and is still extensively used in motorcycle imagery including movies and more interestingly, advertisements. The relationship between rock 'n' roll music and motorcycling seems like a natural pairing, as again, both reject social norms and aspire to the freedom of artistic creation.

Monument Valley is probably the most iconic example of using natural landscapes as a nostalgic tool; with the western movie genre being heavily associated with this area of land. Interestingly, there is a poignant scene in *Easy Rider* where Hopper and Fonda ride through Monument Valley at sunset, with the scene ending by showing a full 360 degree shot of the sun setting over the hills. This moment was Dennis Hopper's "greatest memory"⁶⁷ of filming, a telling statement of the impact the sublime landscape has upon the filmmakers, before the final movie was even shown to viewers. The choice to drive through this area of land is a key example of motorcycle culture referencing the frontier. The notion of adventures free of social constraint is promoted incredibly well with motorcycle culture.⁶⁸ These natural formations are viewed by vehicle, in the western genre the mode of transportation is a horse, and of course the 1960s version of outlaw freedom is seen by motorcycle.

⁶⁷ Drutt ed., *The Art of the Motorcycle*, 65.

⁶⁸ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 945.

Both freedom and liberty -- the values that the country was founded upon -- are shown through the visuals of vast landscapes and the sublime beauty of nature. Nature is key in implementing American nostalgia. Referencing nature is intended to humble the viewer by referring them back to the beginning of the Country. An attempt is made here, in *Easy Rider*, during a period of unrest. Yet, the film's ending destroys all peace shown with nature, as those wanting to be free fall prey to the social turmoil, which is a comment on the next section, America's commodity culture.

The federal aid highway act of 1956 joined almost every town in America to one another, restricting the idea of freedom to one that was monitored and quite literally 'on the map'. What was conceptualised as both an accessibility precaution during a possible nuclear war, and to ease traffic issues⁶⁹, ultimately shifted the iconography of American culture. As addressed subliminally in *Easy Rider*, the frontier has now closed, with the adventures the wilderness held, now being accessible by millions of conveniently tarmacked roads. The hope and freedom associated with cross country adventure has been replaced with control and importance of commodity during the "golden age of the automobile"⁷⁰. The construction of these highways simultaneously opened a new frontier for the modern American who owned some form of transportation, whilst closing the nostalgic idea of the frontier as implied in *Easy Rider*.

⁶⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/interstate-highway-system>

⁷⁰ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 7.



Possibly the most important correlation between old western iconography and motorcycle culture is the emphasis on the

Peter Fonda as Captain America, *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969. 6:57.

idealism of the American system. The quintessentially American factors that are shown subliminally in *Easy Rider* can be easily recognised in one form: the American flag. Literally, the American flag is a rectangle that within its perimeter has stripes and stars using the varying colours of red, white and blue. These symbols, however, have applied meaning by each individual who sees it. Typically, the flag is a symbol that reflects the Country's values and thus its citizens', usually encompassing the meaning of the American flag is usually related to national pride.⁷¹ Yet, the shooting of specific frames in *Easy Rider* plays on the irony of these values during a period of social division. Chappel's "The Failure of the Flag in Easy Rider" discusses the extensive use of the flag in the movie and its deeper representations of "freedom symbolized by America, a freedom three men die trying to attain."⁷² There is a certain amount of irony in choosing to use the American flag so often --

⁷¹ Michael J. Chappel, "The failure of the Flag in Easy Rider" *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 1 (2005).

⁷² Ibid.

especially in certain scenes -- during a film that is quite clearly questioning the running of the country.

Specifically, Fonda's character -- appropriately named Captain America -- is a walking American flag, with his motorcycle gas tank adorning the stars and stripes, along with the back of his leather jacket, and his matching helmet. Dressed as a "biker Uncle Sam,"⁷³ his attitude towards the country seems more in relation to despair than pride. There are numerous examples of the flag throughout the movie, visible in almost every scene. As mentioned earlier in the first section of this chapter, one of the most poignant examples is following the drug deal at the start of the film. The money gained from this transaction is kept in the gas line within the tank decorated with stars and stripes, a clear metaphor for the questionable ways in which America has become rich. The contents of the gas tank give the two characters their retirement fund, "he [Wyatt] is simply one more retiring American citizen. It does not matter how they got the money to retire; after all, there are plenty of businessmen retired in Florida who made their money in equally unsavory ways."⁷⁴ The flag on Wyatt's motorcycle is used as a reflection of the American Dream and its flaws. Fundamentally, the American Dream is the goal of the masses to gain wealth quickly regardless of morals, to avoid manual labour and retire to a comfortable lifestyle.

Ultimately, the flag shown in *Easy Rider* was deliberately filmed to show that the freedom the flag is recognised for is no longer relevant to modern America. Much like addressing the closing of the frontier by travelling across the country from west to east, the filming of the

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Chappel, "The failure of the Flag".

flag upside down represents that freedom is dead.⁷⁵ As the movie was released during the social and political turmoil of the Vietnam war, the movie not only romanticized the freedom affiliated with founding and earlier eras of the country but it declared that this freedom was no longer applicable to American society. As Jack Nicholson's character George eloquently phrases it, "it's hard to be free when you're bought and sold in the marketplace,"⁷⁶ with both the aggressive drivers that irrationally murder Hopper and Fonda, and poignantly the Texas thugs that beat Nicholson to death, are willing to "pull the trigger or swing the axe in their anger to prove how free they are."⁷⁷

During an age where engaging in full time employment involved you in the national identity -- and adding to the economy boom -- the motorcyclist was a curious character. Opposing the lifestyle traits linked with "social belonging"⁷⁸ and the constant need for material things set the outlaw motorcyclist aside from the majority of American citizens. For this reason, the motorcyclist associated with clubs like the Hells Angels were compared to frontiersmen. Their often excessive enjoyment of alcohol (and in the 1960s, marijuana), their love for the outdoors, along with the male comradery and their hardworking nature, often coupled with working class behavioural traits of fighting.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ *Easy Rider*, 1:10:19.

⁷⁷ Chappel, "The failure of the Flag".

⁷⁸ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 33.

⁷⁹ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 54.

A morally complex hero in popular culture is a theme of American culture that has continued for generations. Both the western genre's hero and the outlaw motorcyclist embody values that to some are admirable (the rejection of mainstream society, often celebrated by the youthful), while their lifestyle and actions are considered to be unjust and violent by authority (by police, politicians and media sources like newspapers and television reports). The relationship between the outlaw motorcyclist -- with the Hells Angels being the prime example -- and law enforcement⁸⁰ is a similar notion to how old western vigilante types were the enemy of the state during the late nineteenth



Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969. 54:01.

century. The controversy attached to both the cowboy and the outlaw biker is one of the explanations as to why both themes have continued in -- and eventually have become a part of -- American culture. It is interesting to note that during the late 1960s, amongst the height of the biker genre's success, the western movies that would become the most iconic of its genre were also being released. Movies including *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) amongst

⁸⁰ A perfect example of this tension would be the Lynch report. The attorney general of California released a document stating that law enforcement needed to be tougher against motorcycle clubs such as the Hells Angels. The document listed numerous crimes allegedly committed by the club.

many more are a fascinating parallel to the motorcycle movies that often shared similar visual themes. Dennis Hopper even admitted that when he and Fonda were in the first stages of creating *Easy Rider* that, “we would never make another biker movie// we didn’t want to become// the John Wayne and Ward Bond of bike flicks”.⁸¹ Below is a film still from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* that resembles parts of *Easy Rider*.



A film still from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Directed by George Roy Hill, Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1969. 9:12.

Conclusion

Not only was the filming and editing of *Easy Rider* a refreshing addition to cinema, but the content of the film came at the perfect time for America’s youth. The labelling of the outlaw biker as the new western hero is no coincidence. During a decade filled with social tension, it makes sense that the country needed an enemy that inspired equal amounts of hatred and fascination, as the cowboy has been doing for generations. The quote placed at the very

⁸¹ Drutt, *The Art of the Motorcycle*, 63.

beginning of this chapter is telling of the social environment in which the biker rose to fame. When the hope of the American Dream had been abandoned by many, the outlaw motorcyclist embodied the rebellious strength that many wished they had. I believe that the biker genre -- similar to the western genre -- was so successful during the 1960s specifically because of the complex social environment.

The images that ultimately created the motorcyclist have deep ties to western iconography, which have interesting connotations to 1960s society. During a decade of what could be described as an identity crisis, representations showed the outlaw motorcyclist to embody much of what the western genre's hero did but bringing these elements into the modern era. The popularity of the outlaw biker in imagery -- specifically movies -- signal the confusion and desperation the youth of America felt in regard to the government and its decisions.

The nostalgia attached to the American west is the foundation of motorcycle culture. The correlations between the outlaw biker and the cowboy seem endless, with the sources I have considered earlier in this chapter to be a good indication of the extent to which the motorcyclist is linked with the frontier. The elements of landscape and its sublime beauty have both been used -- in excess -- within western and motorcycling iconography. Due to imagery in both film and photography, the clothing that the outlaw motorcyclist is now typically associated with takes direct links from the west; Levi's jeans that even originated with the cowboy's need for strong denim, leather accessories for their durability, and of course the assumption of unclean clothes due to living a lifestyle based outdoors. The tension between the outlaw and the authority figure is something that is shared by both the

western genre and motorcycle culture, due to their will to live outside the accepted social normalities.

In the following chapter I will address another key element of motorcycle culture: masculinity. I will examine how *The Wild One* began the portrayal of masculinity within motorcycle culture, and how the underpinning beatnik values played an important role within initiating a complex relationship between the outlaw motorcyclist and the counterculture in 1960s popular culture.

Chapter Two: Masculinity in *The Wild One* and how this affected 1960s imagery in representing the outlaw motorcyclists' relationship with the counterculture.

“AMERICA NOW WOKE UP TO A TERRIBLE THREAT FROM WITHIN.”

1. Matthew Drutt ed., *The Art of the Motorcycle*, (New York: Guggenheim, 1998) 49.

‘Outlaw’ : “a person who has broken the law and who lives separately from the other parts of society because they want to escape legal punishment.”

‘Counterculture’ : “a way of life and a set of ideas that are completely different from those accepted by most of society, or the group of people who live this way.”⁸²

The 1960s was a decade of political and social chaos. Civil and gender rights were being rewritten, divisions created from the Vietnam War and the controversy over nuclear weapons meant a rebellion from the youth, who had come of age in an America free of war and economic struggle.⁸³ Youth oriented cinema became popular due to the growing independent nature of younger generations. As mentioned in the introduction, Roland Barthes *Rhetoric of the Image*⁸⁴ is an incredibly important example in the case of the biker. When examining the counterculture connection, as the definitions at the top of this page show the outlaw bikers shown in *Easy Rider* are far more likely to fit under the counterculture definition than the outlaw definition. This chapter will discuss *The Wild One*

⁸² These definitions are taken from the Cambridge dictionary.

⁸³ This is assuming that most teens and those in their early twenties were born in the late 1940s and 1950s, which was a time of economic prosperity for America following their involvement in the Second world War.

⁸⁴ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1968), 269-285.

and its incredible importance to motorcycle culture, due to the themes of masculinity in relating to the 'outlaw' status and the counterculture. Marlon Brando's character is part of the counterculture, not the outlaw motorcyclists. These representations of misleading visual connotations have led to the confusion I am discussing in this chapter.

Motorcycle culture is one of the stranger cultural phenomenons of the 20th Century. With a unique mixture of top down and bottom up culture, the motorcycle was simply a form of transportation before imagery circulated in popular culture initiating an entire lifestyle based on emphasized visual and symbolic connotations. Pictures of the Hollister riot⁸⁵ sensationalised motorcyclists' drunken behaviour from juvenile to that of terrorists.

Following this media storm, *The Wild One*⁸⁶ then transformed the events of Hollister into a social movement. As mentioned in the introduction, the highway act of 1956 meant that an excess of 41,000 miles of road were constructed across the country, with growing numbers of automobile sales.⁸⁷ Getting from one place to another had never been so accessible, with motorcycling becoming incredibly convenient. The mass of biker propaganda that flooded the 1960s is enough to understand that -- for several reasons -- the idea of the motorcycle had some form of allure for the imagery to continue for the majority of a decade. As the 1960s drew to a close, *Easy Rider* transformed the notion of the motorcycle entirely, bringing an end to the biker movie genre and altering/ romanticising motorcycling for the foreseeable future.

⁸⁵ See page 50 for a description of the event and its importance to motorcycle culture.

⁸⁶ *The Wild One*. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

⁸⁷ Martin Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR: Cultural confusion and the biker film cycle" *New York* 6 (1994) 358.

The power and influence of images was at an incredible high, with my research thus far allowing me to deduce that the creation of motorcycle culture was thanks to an accumulation of images from differing perspectives, with the focus of aggressive masculinity being one of the essential roots of the motorcycle lifestyle. In this circumstance, the content and extent of these depictions of the biker meant the connotations became the denotation. Images circulated through popular culture of the 1960s gave a disjointed view of the realities of both the counterculture and the outlaw motorcyclist, by insinuating that outlaw bikers were simply hippies that enjoyed a lifestyle free of social constraint - as the counterculture desired - by riding motorcycles wherever they pleased. In reality, the relationship between the outlaw motorcyclist and the counterculture is complex and intriguing.

Masculinity in *The Wild One*

The masculine outlaw image that is now paired with the motorcyclist was initially presented to the public in 1947. Furthermore, it was cemented by the release of *The Wild One* in 1953. Starring Marlon Brando, Johnny and his club of beer loving bikers run riot in a small town, taking inspiration from the sensationalised events of the Hollister riot and the subsequent short story, "Cyclists Raid," that was printed in Harper's Bazaar magazine in 1951.⁸⁸ The movie was considered so controversial that it was not released in the United Kingdom until 1967,⁸⁹ just two years before *Easy Rider*'s cinematic debut.

⁸⁸ Bill Osgerby, "Sleazy Riders" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31 (2003): 98-108.

It is interesting that such a political issue of Harper's Bazaar - that included pieces regarding Stalin and Churchill - would include such a controversial pop culture piece that focused on outlaw motorcyclists.

⁸⁹ <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/wild-one>

The British Board of Film Classification banned *The Wild One* from being screened in the UK for fear of inspiring "juvenile delinquency" in the British youth. By 1967 the content of the film seemed far too dated to have an impact.

The majority of the stereotypical associations of the outlaw motorcyclist that still exist today, were first represented in *The Wild One*. To name an example, the leather jacket that Johnny made into an iconic symbol of motorcycling was not typically adopted by those considered to be real 'outlaws'. Marlon Brando's costume for *The Wild One* consisted of a leather jacket, dark jeans and black boots. This was a look that coincided with the previous generations' cinematic rebels, the greasers of the 1950s.⁹⁰ Skipping ahead to the 1960s, the photo of Hambone for reference -- a member of the San Berdoo chapter of the Hells Angels on page 53 -- sporting his outlaw uniform. Although both men look disheveled at first glance, there are numerous differences. Where Brando pioneered the leather jacket, the



Hells Angels proudly wore Levi's denim covered in various patches declaring their loyalty for the club. The Hells Angels were usually unshaven, with longer hair and often covered in grease from tinkering with their bikes. Brando's leather jacket is a key example of the cultural connotations of motorcycle culture that became a denotation⁹¹, as it became a fashion

Marlon Brando as Johnny, *The Wild One*. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

⁹⁰ James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1954) wore a similar outfit, with the only major difference being the jacket.

D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010): 948.

⁹¹ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 948.

trend simply associated with ‘biker’ culture that continues to this day.⁹²

The leather jackets worn by the bikers in *The Wild One* would secure the masculine attachments to the motorcyclist for the foreseeable future. Continuing on from the traditions of the frontier, the outlaw motorcyclist embodied a “husky” and often violent demeanour that is associated with western heroes. The male comradery that is associated with the American frontier is acknowledged in the movie through the club members wearing the same style jacket. As mentioned in the introduction, *The Rise of the American Motorcyclist* by Randy D. McBee is the fundamental academic text in motorcycling history. His book is a comprehensive document of the beginning of motorcycle culture in America, taken from a political and social historical perspective. A small section of his research into gender within motorcycle culture relates back to the western theme of masculine dominance. McBee discusses how during the late 1960s, openly homosexual men adopted biker fashion styling as a way of challenging stereotypes, since images of the Hells Angels were so commonly shown within media and cinematic depictions. This however, reinforced the masculine aggression that outlaw motorcycle clubs were known for in popular culture representations.⁹³

A key writer that discusses the interactions of the outlaw bikers and the counterculture is John Wood. In his article, “Hells Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture”, the complications that existed between these subcultures is explored. Interestingly, Wood

⁹² With many fashion retailers describing the particular cut of jacket as a ‘biker’ jacket, whether made from leather or other fabrics.

⁹³ Randy D. McBee, *Born To Be Wild: The Rise of the American Motorcyclist*, (US: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 14.

concludes that the tensions originated with the birth of biker culture, with *The Wild One*. *The Wild One* defined the outlaw motorcyclist before the notion had become a familiar societal concept. Brando's role as Johnny was most likely where the link between the motorcyclist and counterculture values originated, as Johnny leads the Black Rebels motorcycle club with a mixture of beat and counterculture influences, as displayed in the movie poster below, with the club being described as "jazzed up beats". The differences between beatniks and hippies are complex, but the counterculture followed on from many of the rebellious beat values, which is why I state here that the confusion originated in *The Wild One*. As Johnny was a beat -- and as the beats evolved in many ways into the counterculture -- the motorcyclist imagery of the film became associated with the counterculture as the biker image continued to rise in 1960s popular culture. As the birth of motorcycle culture, *The Wild One* established the motorcyclist in visual sources that were accessible to the American public. This therefore created a stereotype that the 1960s biker was a newer version of Brando's character Johnny, who used "language of the jazz musicians and beat poets of the era", a perspective that even one of the founding Hells Angels of the San Francisco chapter shared, acknowledging that Johnny ought to be a beat

rather than a biker.⁹⁴ It is understandable that the American public linked the motorcyclist to the counterculture, given the visual attention associated with the 'relationship' between the two social groups, along with the shared rejection of the normal social structure. This concept of an outsider to 'the system' was one of the incorrect depictions the biker movie genre made that led to assumptions of friendly relations between the outlaw motorcyclists



A poster advertising *The Wild One*. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

and the counterculture. When, in fact, clubs like the Hells Angels were organised into 'chapters' of large groups, differing largely from depictions shown in *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider*, where isolated characters take the limelight.

Throughout *The Wild One*, Johnny exerts his masculinity in the stereotypical ways of fighting, dominance and leadership. As the acknowledged leader of the Black Rebels motorcycle club, Johnny encourages the club members to intimidate local townspeople, fight with their enemy biker club (the Beetles), in order to remain the dominant force of the town. Even the sheriff is unable to control the outlaw motorcyclists'

behaviour, with Johnny only being tamed by the love interest -- that happens to be the

⁹⁴ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 48.

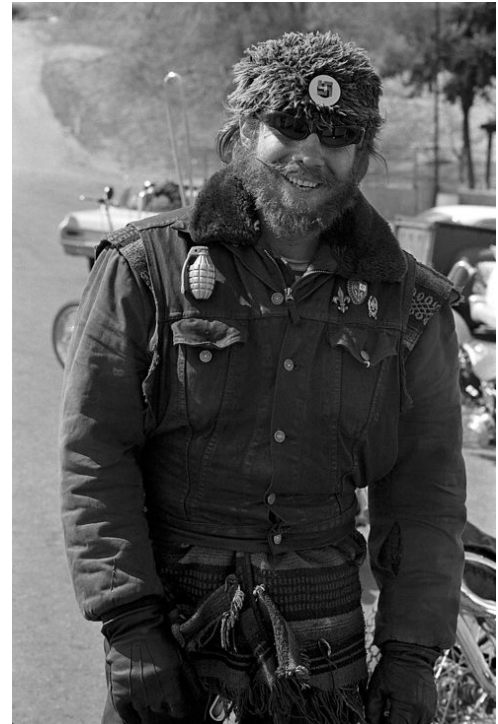
sheriff's daughter -- of the film once Kathie shows him the error of his outlaw ways. The actions and attitude of Johnny -- excluding his redemption at the end of the film -- were the blueprint for biker movies that followed. Masculine aggression was a key ingredient of the biker movie genre, which in 1953, was successfully exaggerated with both Johnny's behaviour and the club members'.

Masculinity in Context

As *The Wild One* created the masculine outlaw biker in popular culture, I must discuss how this came to fruition. The word outlaw became associated with motorcyclists through a period of approximately fifteen years. Initially, the term outlaw was used to describe motorcycle owners who refused to follow the regulations of the American Motorcycle Association. The AMA was founded in 1924 and host -- to this day -- various motorcycle races and events throughout the year. During the 1940s and 1950s, they were the only organisation of its kind. Quite literally, unruly motorcyclists were outlawed from the AMA, sometimes referred to as the "one-percenters"⁹⁵. All other associations with the term outlaw are constructed. So, were these outlaw motorcyclists -- I will discuss the Hells Angels in the most depth -- truly outlaws, or was it just portrayed this way by lively visual imagery? I will be demonstrating how imagery of the decade described and exploited the idea that the motorcyclist was an outlaw of society, rather than the reality of being excluded from the AMA.

⁹⁵ The "one-percenter" term was adopted by the Hells Angels and became one of the popular choice of patch, alongside the usual Hells Angel and chapter patch, the winged skull (or 'death head'), the 81 patch (addressing the number of both H and A in the alphabet). And the 'lucky 13' patch (which addresses the number of the letter M in the alphabet for representing marijuana).

The visual eruption of the outlaw motorcyclist across popular culture initially began with media attention from *LIFE* magazine in 1947, regarding the first AMA 'gypsy tour' event following the second world war. An allegedly staged photograph was published of Eddie Davenport drunkenly sprawled across a motorcycle (despite not even owning one himself)⁹⁶ holding a beer in each hand. The image with its short yet disturbing accompanying story stirred fear into the nation by declaring that hundreds of violent motorcyclists had terrorised the small town of Hollister, resulting in the renaming of the event to the 'Hollister riot'. The fourth of July weekend was usually a respectable encounter, the meet was to be filled with races and various motorcycling competitions. However, many veterans had picked up the hobby of motorcycling as an adrenaline rush following their experiences of war and refused to adjust back to a conventional lifestyle.⁹⁷ Finding the AMA's regulations too rigid, many men formed groups and "quickly tired



Hambone is photographed outside the AMA rally, where the Hells Angels are causing trouble with officials, taken by Bill Ray 1965.

of ordinary motorcycle thrills and turned to more exciting stunts," which at Hollister - according to *LIFE* magazine - consisted of "racing their vehicles down the main street and through traffic lights, they rammed into restaurants and bars, breaking furniture and mirrors". The article also stated that the authorities "could not restore order,"⁹⁸ when in

⁹⁶ The theory of the photograph being staged can be found in full here: <https://mashable.com/2015/05/18/1947-hollister-bike-riot/?europa=true#ZdlZ3pLZDMq6>

⁹⁷ Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, (London: Penguin, 1967), 68.

⁹⁸ Author Unknown, "Cyclists Holiday: He and Friends Terrorise a Town," *LIFE*, July 21st 1947, 31.

reality, the “small police force of twenty-nine had things under control quite quickly,” with a maximum number of fifty people treated at the local hospital for minor injuries and the longest jail sentence given was 90 days for indecent exposure.⁹⁹ Yet, with the extent of LIFE magazine’s influence,¹⁰⁰ the newest public enemy had been announced to America; the ‘outlaw’ motorcyclist.

This outlaw motorcyclist image initially presented to the public in 1947 was cemented by the release of *The Wild One* in 1953. As previously mentioned, the plot of the movie was based on the events of the Hollister riot, yet executed in a more exaggerated way, similar to the media’s portrayal of the weekend. Birney Jarvis - one of the founding members of the San Francisco chapter of the Hells Angels addressed *The Wild One* as the key moment in motorcycle history as it was when the outlaw motorcyclist’s image was born into popular culture. Previously, the club was addressed in local newspapers as ‘motorcyclists’ or a ‘motorcycle club’. Following the release of *The Wild One* and the controversy that entailed, they became the “disruptors of the peace” and named only as the Hells Angels¹⁰¹, proving these clubs had been acknowledged by the press.

⁹⁹ Matthew Drutt ed., *The Art of the Motorcycle*, (New York: Guggenheim, 1998) 48.

¹⁰⁰ Between six and seven million readers per week. Interestingly, LIFE magazine was bought and subsequently taken over by Henry Luce in 1936, who was also on the board at Warner Brothers; the studio that created Bonnie and Clyde. James L Kauffman, *Selling Outer Space: Kennedy, the Media, and Funding for Project Apollo, 1961-1963*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 73.

¹⁰¹ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 48.

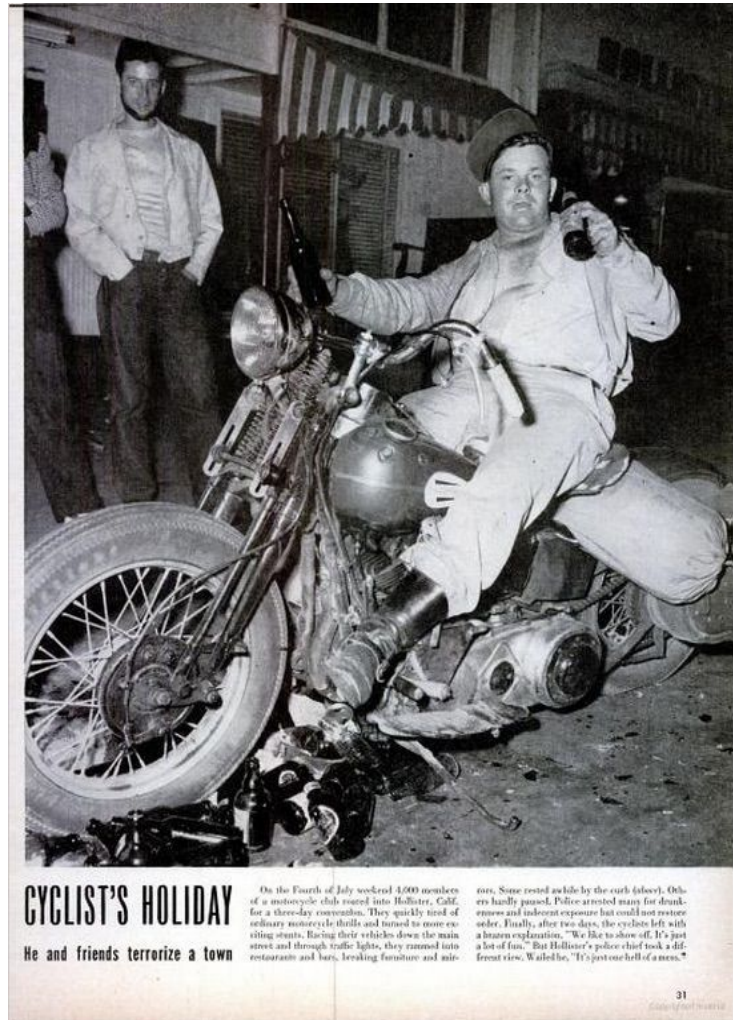
Movies similar to *The Wild One* were hugely popular with youthful audiences during 1950s cinema. Feature length films such as *The Blob* (1958) and *The Creature From the Black*

Lagoon (1954) shared themes of coming of age amongst shocking disturbances that turn the usual everyday events of society upside down. Potentially popular with teenage drive in audiences thanks to the complex and immense psychological Cold War circumstances, *The Wild One* fell amongst a plethora of movies created to shock and transport audiences in to an alternate reality.

Usually starring a strong male lead, accompanied with a female

sidekick, the string of science fiction thrillers that allowed the audience to

journey alongside a troubled teen amongst life threatening situations run along a similar vein to *The Wild One*. Johnny's dedication to rebel against authority led him to live and ride with the Black Rebels. Despite causing chaos throughout much of the movie, Johnny's outlaw status is dissolved eventually once he realises and regrets the path he has strayed on to. The coming of age story with a rebellious edge was a recipe for success, triggering what would later be known as the biker movie genre.



"Cyclists Holiday," *LIFE*, July 21st, page 31, 1947.

Many movies throughout the 1950s that were directed at teenage audiences used themes of opposing authority whilst from a youthful perspective. The New Hollywood movement that occurred following the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 was essentially a reboot of the drive-in movie scene of the 1950s. However, this time around, there was blood, death, drugs, swearing and violence. As times were changing politically, the severity of movie themes were too. The biker movie genre encompassed all of these things -- with heightened themes of masculinity -- proving it to be popular with younger audience who harboured aggressive attitudes towards the older generation that was presumed to be responsible for difficult social and financial times.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Bert Cardullo, "Through the Looking Glass: The American Art Cinema in an Age of Social Change," *The Midwest Quarterly* 52 (2010): 94.



American Motorcycle Association Gypsy Tour award money clip for “Put Your Best Wheel Forward” campaign, 1961.

The exploration of masculinity within motorcycling becomes more interesting when acknowledging suburban motorcycle owners. Despite the imagery discussed in this thesis pushing forward a specific narrative of the outlaw biker, citizens of 1960s

America owned motorcycles for recreational, sporting and career reasons. Popular culture of

the decade focused on the ‘one-percenters’¹⁰³ of

motorcycling, so, what about the other ninety-nine percent? A question this vast could be a research project within itself, therefore I will simply address the predominant reasons for owning a motorcycle that does not include joining an outlaw club and expressing the traits associated with doing so. What began as a sport at the very beginning of the twentieth century, motorcycle racing became so popular that an organisation was required to document membership numbers and curate events (for example, the Gypsy tours that still are ongoing). The Motorcycle and Allied Trade Association (M&ATA, that preceded the American Motorcycle Association) gained 10,000 members by early 1924, just five years after its founding.¹⁰⁴ Campaigns by the AMA promoted safe riding habits, neat appearances and general respect for the public by using mufflers on their exhausts to reduce noise. The photograph above is an example of this, with an AMA pin from the 1961 “put your best wheel forward” campaign. As it was the AMA who outlawed the troublesome one percent, I have added an example (below) of the ninety-nine percent who pursued motorcycling for over fifty years. Walt Axthelm was a talented off-road racer who won various races

¹⁰³ Osgerby, “Sleazy Riders,” 90.

¹⁰⁴ For more facts and figures, see: <https://www.americanmotorcyclist.com/About-The-AMA/Story/history-of-the-ama>

throughout the 1950s and 1960s, his career spanning into the early 2000's. In terms of masculinity, motorcycling as a sport was largely dominated by men.¹⁰⁵ However, unlike the Hells Angels and other motorcycle clubs, females were free to become members and participate.

Along with sporting activities, motorcycling became extremely useful in other areas of



Walt Axthelm talking with the press, photographer unknown, International Six Day Trials, 19-24 September, Bad Aussee, Austria, 1960.

society. The vehicle's mobility, speed and versatility became an important tool for delivering messages during World War One before the luxury of radio communication.¹⁰⁶ Harley Davidson was a key supplier of motorcycles during wartime, creating

and shipping 20,000 motorcycles overseas in WWI and 88,000 in

¹⁰⁵ Carol J. Auster, "Transcending Potential Antecedent Leisure Constraints: The Case of Women Motorcycle Operators," *Journal of Leisure Research* 33 (2001): 291.

¹⁰⁶ Phyllis McIntosh, "Motorcycles On the Move," *English Teaching Forum*, 51 (2013): 39.

WWII.¹⁰⁷ Both Indian and Harley Davidson were commissioned by the American government to develop motorcycles specifically for the military.¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, the first American to enter Germany did so on a Harley Davidson.¹⁰⁹ Used within both world wars, the motorcycle also became commonly used within law enforcement across America.

Although this thesis focuses on the phenomenon of outlaw motorcyclists, active members of societal traditions also chose to ride, and enjoyed riding for similar reasons (albeit executed in very different ways). Unfortunately for the many who chose to ride socially, the influence that outlaw motorcycle clubs had across 1960s imagery damaged both the reputation and the safety of recreational riders, by subjecting them to prejudice from law enforcement and ignoring helmet laws.¹¹⁰ The 1966 advert below shows what the manufacturer hoped the rider would be, and what the rider wanted the public to acknowledge them as, a respectable motorcyclist. However, a division soon took shape with the dominance of the Hells Angels in newspapers, television reports and cinema depictions. This tension between the outlaw biker and the average motorcycle owner not only adds another layer to the history of the outlaw motorcyclist, but also addresses the importance of imagery throughout the decade as it affected the way motorcyclists were viewed by the “general public”.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁸ Bill Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth: How the Original Cowboy of the Road Became the Easy Rider of the Silver Screen*, (Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2005), 22.

¹⁰⁹ Osgerby, “Sleazy Riders,” 16.

¹¹⁰ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 143.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 151.



Harley Davidson advertisement, *Cycle*, December 1965, 22.

The Outlaw and the Counterculture

The term 'outlaw' is one of fundamental aspects of the motorcycle that drew me to this project. The motorcyclist is depicted throughout 1960s imagery as an outsider to social conventions, resonating with the American people in a bizarre way which eventually turned the Hells

Angels into their own unique form of celebrity, even being paid to star in movies as themselves. With their dirty Levi's and death head patches, the Hells Angels had been labelled by popular culture as modern America's newest threat. Yet, with this ostentatious 'outlaw' label often came the misconception that these motorcyclists were in some way connected to the counterculture, a subculture that also aimed to challenge the accepted social system.

Popular culture of the 1960s represented a clear link between both the counterculture and the outlaw motorcyclists, most commonly the Hells Angels. At surface level, it is clear to see

some obvious similarities between these two groups,¹¹² but this did not mean that the outlaw motorcyclist or the counterculture shared views on political and moral situations, with the Vietnam conflict setting these boundaries clearly.¹¹³ Interestingly, sources often state that the counterculture -- the new left¹¹⁴ -- assumed outlaw motorcyclists to be their “protectors” and “fellow rebels from the establishment”¹¹⁵ and associating one another as “individualist hero[es]”.¹¹⁶ As *The Wild One* represented the outlaw biker to be more aligned with counterculture beliefs and attitudes, the movie’s representations created the misconception of the Hells Angels also sharing this lifestyle. In reality, the Hells Angels were fueled by nationalist and aggressively gendered habits.

The Hells Angels and the counterculture did cross paths, with the Hells Angels acting as the unofficial police force for various countercultural events. However, the extent of the relationship between the Hells Angels and the hippies was forged in a mutual appreciation of drugs. After the popular Hells Angel member Chocolate George died in a traffic accident, his funeral was celebrated by both outlaw bikers and the hippies.¹¹⁷ But, these subcultures mostly interacted at Berkeley University during meetings -- turned parties -- to discuss and

¹¹² Given that both groups lived by ideals that were rejected by mainstream society. As mentioned in the page one, the Cambridge dictionary definitions lead me to acknowledge that the visual representations seem to use the counterculture definition to describe the outlaw biker.

¹¹³ Austin, Gagne, Orend, “Commodification,” 951.

¹¹⁴ The students for a democratic society, or SDS, was named the New Left and comprised of politically aware members of the counterculture whose sole intentions were to end the Vietnam conflict.

¹¹⁵ John Wood, “Hells Angels and the Illusion of Counterculture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 37 (2003): 336.

¹¹⁶ As previously mentioned, *The Wild One* was the addition to popular culture that initiated the motorcycle as a lifestyle. Released in 1953, this was the first time mass audiences had been exposed to the notion of the outlaw motorcycle club.

¹¹⁷ Rubin, “MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR”, 355.

Footage of event mentioned in video: <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189595> 0:10 - 0:24.

organise political actions amidst drug use where the motorcyclists' focus was on the latter, or to be more accurate, instilling themselves into a deep stupor.¹¹⁸

John Wood describes how the counterculture saw the "Angels as being similar to the violent and independent yet good hearted bikers romanticized in the 1954 movie *The Wild One*".

This naive viewpoint was confused further with the characters of Hopper and Fonda searching for freedom in *Easy Rider*. The incredible power that images have is proven well here, and confusions between the attitudes of bikers and hippies was often accomplished through movie audiences relating to an emotionally distant main character who rejects the traditional ways of society. Examples include, Johnny in *The Wild One*, Blues in *The Wild Angels* and finally, Hopper and Fonda in *Easy Rider*, that, "portrayed bikers as little more than motorized hippies."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR".

¹¹⁹ Wood, "Hells Angels," 336.

One of the counterculture's main aims during the mid-1960s onwards was putting an end to the Vietnam conflict. Believing that the Hells Angels shared similar views as the counterculture movement, the young protesters received an unfortunate shock on October 16th 1965 at a peaceful march on Berkeley college campus.¹²⁰ What began as a peaceful protest led to five members of the Hells Angels shouting and attempting to violently attack protestors. Members of the counterculture - including Allen Ginsberg who had previously partied with the Oakland chapter - were beaten by the motorcycle club, with the Hells Angels later offering their services to fight the Vietcong if needed and denouncing any

¹²⁰ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, (US: Praeger, 2002): 71.

involvement and further association with the VDC because it may trigger violent reactions from their members.¹²¹

Sonny Barger -- the founder of the Hells Angels -- declared in a press conference that the



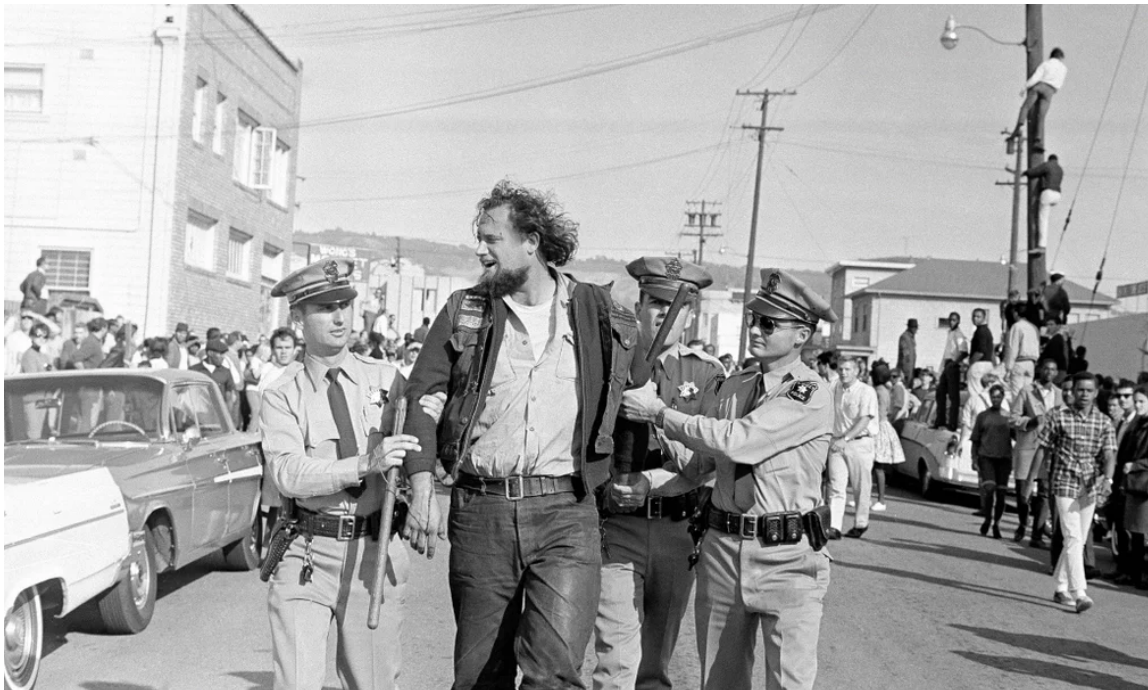
A fight breaks out between the Hells Angels and anti Vietnam protestors, Berkeley, California, October 16th 1965, photographer unknown, Bettman Collection.

anti Vietnam protests -- in this case specifically the Vietnam Day Committee -- were “un-American” and the club would no longer associate themselves with the movement, encouraging, “all other Americans to do the same”.¹²² The photo below captures the

¹²¹ Wood, “Hells Angels,” 337.

¹²² The Hells Angels -- led by Sonny Barger -- held a press conference following the October 16th Vietnam protest. In the press conference, the Oakland chapter denounced any involvement and further association with the VDC because it may trigger violent reactions from their members. Believing that opposing Vietnam was anti American and should be stopped. He continued to read a telegram the chapter had sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson offering their assistance on the front line, saying they were available immediately for training. The news

moment where Hells Angel Michael H. Walters is arrested for breaking through police barriers and assaulting protestors and a policeman. The shot is almost perfectly framed by the buildings on the left and the mast on the right, with Walter demanding the viewers attention. His height and build needed three officers to escort him, accentuating the 'wildness' usually associated with outlaw bikers. Leaving the chaos behind, the violent Hells Angel is attempted to be controlled by law enforcement while he laughs about his actions. Yet, the counterculture still believed, thanks to the countless visual sources I have



Hells Angels member Michael H. Walters is being taken by police after violent behaviour at an anti Vietnam protest, October 16th 1965, photographer unknown.

previously discussed, that the “media-inspired idea of the Angels being caretakers of individualism”¹²³ was in fact true, and that the Hells Angels truly believed in the counterculture cause.

report was originally shown on KRON-TV. The video can be found here:
<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/225552>

¹²³ Wood, “Hells Angels,” 339.

One of the main underlying differences between the counterculture and the outlaw motorcyclist is patriotism and nationalism. Both elements added to much of the social turmoil of the decade, providing a fascinating tension between these two subcultures. In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, there are interesting discussions regarding the beginning of societies and how nationalism became an accepted -- or familiarised -- notion and attitude. Anderson claims that nationalism is fuelled with the hope of unifying and universalising a Country or group of people, yet has aspects of fear and hatred which ultimately leads to a naive perception of war and dying for one's Country, class systems and eventually racism.¹²⁴

The notion of patriotism and nationalism were being questioned and strongly contested by the counterculture,¹²⁵ while outlaw motorcyclists aggressively embraced these ideals (quite literally, as shown in the previous photograph), despite how images depicted the two subcultures as allies. Where the counterculture fundamentally opposed the basic ideas of patriotism and nationalism and its reactive patriotic undertones, the Hells Angels were incredibly reactive in their political views, embracing nationalistic attitudes. The events of October 16th are an obvious example of the extent to which these bikers believe in the importance of national identity. This is clearest when the Hells Angels vocally supported the Vietnam war and therefore rejected any alliance with the counterculture.

¹²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983) 141, 149.

¹²⁵ Quart, Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, 225.

The complexities of the relationship between the counterculture and the outlaw motorcyclist is developed further when considering *Easy Rider's* approach towards nationalism. Considered both a counterculture and biker movie, the film's essence is questioning the American system (which the hippies supported) whilst identifying as American outlaw bikers (which the Hells Angels supported). The tensions and complexities between the outlaw bikers and the counterculture are numerous, with nationalism and passionate views on political issues signalling the end of any sort of alliance.

Any relations between the counterculture and the outlaw motorcyclist dissolved following the horrific events at Altamont in 1969.¹²⁶ The Hells Angels were hired by The Rolling Stones as security for a free concert they were hosting, advertised as the West Coast Woodstock festival.¹²⁷ The Angels spent the evening beating each other and fellow concert audience members with pool cues (this can be seen in the image below) and finally, the club targeted Meredith Hunter -- an eighteen year old African American man -- and repeatedly stabbed and beat him to death.¹²⁸ The death of the young boy proved to be the final interaction between the counterculture and the Hells Angels. The concert not only signified the end of the connections between these subcultures, but saw the decline of the counterculture movement.¹²⁹ The reality of the outlaw motorcyclist was scarily different to what the counterculture assumed them to be; *The Wild One* was not a denotation of biker culture, it was a dangerously optimistic connotation by the late sixties. The era of peace and love, it seemed, was over.

¹²⁶ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 953.

¹²⁷ Quart, Auster, *American Film*, 71.

¹²⁸ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 951.

¹²⁹ Quart, Auster, *American Film*, 72.



Altamont festival, where Meredith Hunter was stabbed by a Hells Angels member, December 6th, 1969, photographer unknown.

Conclusion

To conclude, the incorrect assumption that the Hells Angels existed alongside the counterculture is a poignant example of the importance of imagery, specifically within popular culture. *The Wild One* was incredibly important within the visual history of motorcycling, unfortunately beginning a narrative that would be dangerously outdated by the 1960s. While the counterculture wanted to put an end to the Vietnam conflict, the Hells Angels declared their opposition to the VDC in a public press conference. Yet, where the counterculture encouraged drug use, the Hells Angels happily complied. The images that were displayed of the motorcyclist in movies like *The Wild One* and much later in *Easy Rider* are examples of how the peaceful depiction of outlaw bikers created an idealistic view of the motorcyclist, altering the gritty reality of the outlaw motorcyclists lifestyle and ethos to some audiences. This disjointed view the counterculture held of the Hells Angels was

incredibly naive, and was established with connotative depictions of outlaw bikers like Johnny in *The Wild One*. However, as mentioned previously, these relations had rapidly deteriorated by 1969, once the counterculture had experienced the reality of the Hells Angels and their volatile, aggressive behaviour.

The visual culture of a pre-*Easy Rider* was filled with shocking AIP type biker films, extensive negative media attention circulating the Hells Angels and motorcyclists generally having an awful reputation. As the decade drew to a close, amongst the novels, television reports, newspaper articles, documentary photographs and interviews, and with the sea of biker movies, the image of the outlaw motorcyclist was well and truly woven into the fabric of American society,¹³⁰ with many who associated with the likes of motorcycles or even leather jackets to be considered a criminal.¹³¹ The role of images was crucial in altering audiences opinions on motorcyclists. McBee states how, “the public’s increasingly vocal fear that all motorcyclists were outlaws suggests a discernible shift in the public’s view of motorcycling some time between the end of the Hollister riot and the mid 1960s.”¹³² I would confidently assume that this is because of biker movies and the relentless negative media attention the Hells Angels specifically, received.

As briefly mentioned, *Easy Rider* deepened the counterculture/outlaw tensions due to the immense influence it had on the issue. The 1969 movie reinforced the countercultural notions presented in *The Wild One*, with the protagonists presented as hippies whilst riding motorcycles, identifying as outlaws. The complexity of this representation altered

¹³⁰ Austin, Gagne, Orend, “Commodification.” 942.

¹³¹ Even motorcycle stunt performer Even Knievel experienced prejudice, Randy D McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 46.

¹³² Ibid.

motorcycling for the foreseeable future, as I will discuss in depth within the conclusion, yet it is interesting that the movie to end the biker movie genre depicted the outlaw biker as a hippy, much like the movie that kickstarted the genre represented the outlaw biker as a beat.

Simply, the counterculture and the Hells Angels were two entirely different breeds of rebel, with the motorcyclist existing as a hybrid of both countercultural and outlaw definitions. *The Wild One* defined the outlaw biker according to 1950s cinematic rebels, meaning that once outlaw motorcycle clubs exploded into popular culture in the 1960s, this beat attitude was outdated. The complexity between the outlaw biker and the counterculture is one of the many complexities within 1960s America, which interestingly, originated directly from visual depictions. Without the dominance of images, and their various - often contradicting views - the debate of these subcultures' representations would never have even been initiated.

“ONE CAN BE A LADY AND A MOTORCYCLE RIDER AT THE SAME TIME.”

1. “An All-American Girl,” *American Motorcycling*, January 1947, 27.

As previously declared, my research thus far has led me to acknowledge that the genesis of motorcycle culture was constructed by images. From the 1947 Hollister riot and Eddie Davenport’s drunken photograph published in *LIFE* magazine, the fear created by sensationalised media attention led to a series of outlaw motorcycle themed movies and exaggerated newspaper headlines.¹³³ The power of images is the fundamental basis to my work, with this chapter discussing the specific ways women were represented in motorcycle culture imagery. With second wave feminism erupting across America, the 1960s signalled a huge cultural change for women. What makes the representation of women’s roles within motorcycle culture even more interesting during this period is the lack of attention the feminist movement received in almost all imagery. Why was this ignored? Were the dominant sources rejecting this new ‘vision of equality’ women had and thus endorsing the hyper masculine patriarchal culture of motorcycling through images? It appears that those who participated in motorcycle culture were fundamentally trying to reinforce conventional gender stereotypes.

¹³³ Martin Rubin, “MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR: Cultural confusion and the biker film cycle” *New York* 6 (1994) 361.

As a topic only discussed by a handful of scholars¹³⁴, the role of women within motorcycle culture using art historical paradigms allows a unique perspective to analyse the representation of the biker. Within this chapter I will explore the ways women were represented within motorcycle culture through diverse visual imagery of the 1960s. I will start this analysis by focusing on the disturbing events that take place during *The Wild Angels*¹³⁵ (1965). Using the themes of motorcycle culture noted thus far from scholarly sources, I will attempt to understand and explain the reasoning behind women's portrayals in the biker movie genre and questionable depictions of women in motorcycle advertisements.

To further ground my research, I will analyse primary sources to add a differing perspective. I must briefly acknowledge that many declarations made by women who rode with the Hells Angels were often tainted by the men's authority, supporting the established view of the motorcyclist. Due to the scope of this project, my goal is to explore numerous representations; not to find the truth behind women's lives with the Hells Angels, or any lived experience within my topic, as this would be almost impossible given the extent of male dominance in both the club and the wider culture. The primary sources included in this chapter include an interview with the women who rode with the Hells Angels and Hunter S. Thompson's book *Hells Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle*

¹³⁴ Notably; Martin Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR: Cultural confusion and the biker film cycle" *New York* 6 (1994) 355-381, Allison, "The Brief Ride of the Biker Movie," *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 3 (2007), Randy D McBee, *Born To Be Wild: The Rise of the American Motorcyclist*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 127-152, Bill Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth: How the Original Cowboy of the Road Became the Easy Rider of the Silver Screen*, (Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2005).

¹³⁵ *The Wild Angels*. Directed by Roger Corman, Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1966.

Gangs.¹³⁶ Thompson's book as a source is limited due to his journalistic and financially invested standpoint, yet his book is useful for names of members, dates of events and general behavioural traits of the club. The photographer Bill Ray also gives insight into the lifestyles of the Hells Angels through his 1965 series of documentary photograph. By comparing these primary sources to *The Wild Angels*, I will attempt to demonstrate what was constructed through images, by asking why the content of these images only include certain attributes.

Feminism in *The Wild Angels*

One of the earliest and most successful films within the biker movie genre is *The Wild Angels*, which was the highest grossing film from American International Pictures to date.¹³⁷ Originally titled *All the Fallen Angels*, the unexpected success of the film acknowledged the financial potential of biker films. Starring Peter Fonda as the leader of the Hells Angels inspired on screen motorcycle club, the movie encompasses the typical traits of the biker movie. The film was directed by one of the leading figures of the B movie: Roger Corman. Corman was key in pushing forward the traits of New Hollywood. The success of *The Wild Angels* and other shocking movies was no accident, these young actors and directors were capitalising on the 45,000 drive-in theatres across the United States¹³⁸ by giving teenage

¹³⁶ *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, was published in 1967. The 278 pages discuss the club's opinions on their newly appointed outlaw celebrity status, amongst various scandals including the Monterey rape and the Bass Lake run. As a journalist's perspective, I am aware that opinions held in the book may not be entirely accurate, as Thompson's writing style has certain elements of fiction. Nonetheless, the book is incredibly useful as a primary source, and judging by the reaction given by the Hells Angels - mostly threats of violence - it is unlikely that Thompson had written about the club in a way they saw accurate.

¹³⁷ Allison Perlman, "The Brief Ride of the Biker Movie," *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 3 (2007).

¹³⁸ *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generations Saved Hollywood*, BBC, 2003. Documentary. 11:43

audience what they wanted: violence and rebellion. Taking topics from newspapers -- along with stories from the Hells Angels themselves¹³⁹ -- and sensationalising them into feature length pictures, *The Wild Angels* was a reaction to the ongoing media attention of the Hells Angels. The film embraces violence, the peripheral treatment of women, Nazi insignia, partying, a disgust for capitalist society and an existential main character who internally battles to find his place within it all.¹⁴⁰

An aspect of *The Wild Angels* that initially struck me was the lack of strong female characters. Nancy Sinatra plays Blues' love interest, and frankly has nothing else of interest to her personality. She adds nothing useful to the plot aside from the occasional whining at Blues to satisfy her need for attention. It is clear that her purpose in the movie is for her looks, with the poster on page 80 showing that "she's too much in love to care what she does... or - with whom." It is obvious that her feminine qualities would appeal to the audience, giving a juxtaposition against the men - all pictured below with their motorcycles - who are shown to be burly and "with a chip on their shoulder".

The role women take in *The Wild Angels* is either to promote their sexual availability or to be stereotypically weak and in need of male leadership. From the grieving young woman at her partners funeral who is repeatedly raped, to the strong female who sleeps with virtually the entire motorcycle club, all of the women in the movie display similar traits. Even Nancy Sinatra's character is so incessantly in need of attention, Peter Fonda's character Blues eventually leaves her -- and the rest of the club -- to face his fate with the police. By the final scenes, when the Angels are 'partying' at the funeral in the church, Mike - Nancy Sinatra's

¹³⁹ Vincent Canby, "Roger Corman: A Good Man Gone to 'Pot'," *New York Times*, 18 September 1966.

¹⁴⁰ Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR," 362-363.

character - kisses another man in an attempt to grab Blues' attention. This was of course a careless method as she ends up being completely ignored by Blues and subsequently given more male attention than wanted by other club members.

As a brief explanation of the plot of *The Wild Angels* to give some context, the Loser's - a member of the Hells Angels, or 'Wild Angels' in this case - motorcycle is stolen and during the rescue mission to retrieve the bike, the Loser is fatally shot by a police officer. The rest of the movie is showing the events leading up to his funeral. This includes a 'rescue mission' to retrieve the Loser from hospital and bring him back to the club's living quarters, (this was to prevent the Loser from being arrested once he recovered). By denying him the critical healthcare he needed and removing him from the hospital – using Mike as a decoy to distract the nurse and police officer guarding the room – he later passed away amongst the other club members. During the rescue mission, it is important to note that when a nurse walks in the room to see some of the men stealing the Loser from his hospital bed, one of the men knocks her unconscious and rapes her. This is presumably playing on the stereotype of the outlaw biker, whose aggression and entitlement leads him rape any woman he chooses.

The most disturbing of all the interactions between the sexes in *The Wild Angels* is the gang rape of the Loser's girlfriend at his funeral.¹⁴¹ The funeral itself is where the motorcyclists throw a huge party in the church, at one point taking the corpse out of the coffin and placing a joint in his mouth. His girlfriend is distraught by the events, with her emotions appearing to be the perfect opportunity for the fellow club members to drug her and

¹⁴¹ *The Wild Angels*, 1:02:58

repeatedly rape her on the church alter. The scene is uncomfortable to watch to say the least. Proving that, even in 2019, the shocking nature of these biker films still has an effect on audiences. After watching *The Wild Angels* for the first time (this scene in particular), I understand why audiences in the 1960s associated the Hells Angels and other self-proclaimed 'outlaw' motorcyclists as violent, aggressive and linked to criminal activity. Especially given the amount of negative attention they were receiving in the media. This aggression used headlines such as the Monterey rape¹⁴² for inspiration and further played on the destructive motorcyclist stereotype in order to generate profits in ticket sales.

It is key to note that the inspiration for *The Wild Angels* came from a photograph of Hells Angel member James 'Mother' Miles' funeral published in a newspaper (shown below), addressing why the funeral portion of the movie is extensive.¹⁴³ Attracting hundreds of bikers, Hells Angels and sometimes other clubs, the lines of motorcycles was an impressive sight, one that was repeatedly published -- often with sarcastic or pessimistic stories attached to them -- in various publications and television reports. (Including *LIFE*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *TIME*). There is a fascination surrounding these events as similar to the military funerals for those killed in Vietnam.¹⁴⁴

142 On Labour Day of 1964, several Hells Angels' members were arrested for an alleged gang rape of two young girls (aged 14 and 15) on a beach in Monterey. There was extensive media coverage of the event, triggering a statement by California's attorney general, Thomas C. Lynch. What became known as the Lynch report, was an attempted law enforcement retaliation against motorcycle clubs and their supposed illegal activity.

¹⁴³ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generations Saved Hollywood*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 42.

¹⁴⁴ Rubin, "MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR," 362.

The biker movie genre successfully used scenes of brutality, violence and rape to shock audiences. The genre followed on the popularity of the exploitation movies aimed at teenage audiences in the 1950s, exaggerated further due to the loosening of content regulations in film.¹⁴⁵ Allison Perlman discusses how these films went from “idealized and optimistic visions of teenage life” (1950s science fiction movies) to “pessimism and rebellion” (biker movies) by 1965.¹⁴⁶ Following the attitude trends of youthful audiences, the biker movies proved to be a popular choice. The final scene of *The Wild Angels* is an example of combining the shock factor these movies needed to be successful with addressing an issue the media was making a national interest. The crimes committed by the Hells Angels documented in the Lynch report included numerous sexual assault and rape claims, with this scene solidifying the stereotypical personality traits of the motorcyclist.

¹⁴⁵More background information on *The Wild One* can be found here: <https://bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/wild-one>

¹⁴⁶ Perlman, “The Brief Ride.”

The funeral of a Hells Angel member is held August 1968, United Press International.



When looking at the movie in terms of its social environment, the treatment of women in *The Wild Angels* is an insight into the traditional representations of motorcycle culture. Bill Osgerby described typical traits of the biker movie as, “hardly radical but were rooted in notions of masculine individualism, aggression, independence, and control. Consequently, biker movies invariably marginalized women.”¹⁴⁷ It seems as though women would never be treated respectfully within the biker movie genre while these themes were so dominant. Unfortunately, this meant that women would either be shown as victims or ignored entirely as masculine dominance -- especially of the Caucasian male¹⁴⁸ -- were the stars of the biker movie genre.

¹⁴⁷ Bill Osgerby, “Sleazy Riders” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31 (2003): 106.

¹⁴⁸ Another reason why women fell to the sidelines is most likely because the white male dominated popular culture, cinema and television.

Laura Mulvey's work focuses on the ways in which women are represented within cinema. Within *Visual and Other Pleasures*, she discusses the roles women take within the 'buddy movie'.¹⁴⁹ In these movies, women play peripheral roles to create an erotic object for the pleasure of both the central characters and the audience. The women in *The Wild Angels* are cinematic tools for addressing how interesting male characters are, with the female presence purely to push forward the male's narrative. The intense companionship between the two main characters traditionally, "carry the story without distraction"¹⁵⁰ of female intervention, as the presence of the female characters often deter the progress of the plot, as their purpose is to visually "freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."¹⁵¹ The female is "styled accordingly" as a sexual object for the gaze and subsequent fantasies of the male's desires.

Interestingly, When comparing the writings of Mulvey with Mike's character, the characteristics match almost perfectly. Mike's desperation for Blues' affection hinders the development of Blue's plotline, with her main purpose throughout the film being to continually confess her love for him. Mike attempts to use her sexuality to grab Blues' attention, resulting with him leaving her and the club, preferring to accept his fate with the police. The numerous close-up shots of her face while she confesses her love to Blues makes it seem she is talking directly to the audience. The seemingly one on one contact with Mike and the audience would appeal to the male viewer, allowing him to experience what it would be like if Nancy Sinatra was in fact, saying those words to him.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Easy Rider* is a good example of the buddy movie.

¹⁵⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1989), 19.

¹⁵¹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

¹⁵² Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

Feminism in Context

Despite the exaggerated representation of the raping, pillaging type outlaw biker shown in *The Wild Angels*, the research I have undertaken regarding the Hells Angels, the rape of the Loser's girlfriend in *The Wild Angels* may not have been fictional.¹⁵³ Hunter S. Thompson -- a reporter who lived with the Hells Angels for years in order to document their lifestyle -- discusses the Monterey rape that took place in 1964 in depth. It was this 'headline worthy' event that turned the Hells Angels into celebrities, albeit for awful reasoning.¹⁵⁴ The media created a new public enemy with the Monterey rape. It is hard to know the truth behind certain events, with the Monterey rape being allegedly dramatised by the victims¹⁵⁵¹⁵⁶, and Thompson's writing almost definitely having embellished versions of events.

Thompson posed the question of; how did two teenage girls end up on a beach filled with bikers? The Angels' version of events stated that the girls - who later told police they went to the beach because they "wanted to look at the cyclists" - wanted intercourse but the extent of willing partners was overwhelming for them. The next morning, when the police had set up a roadblock and began to arrest the perpetrators, the rape victims who were sat in the back of the police car were "gigglin', righteously laughin'." The bail was only \$1100, making the case easily fixed by the Angels. Who gave an accurate version of events is unclear, but the participation of the American media is pivotal in the growth of motorcycle

¹⁵³ Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, (London: Penguin, 1967), 16.

¹⁵⁴ With the likes of *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *True*, *Esquire*, *The Saturday Evening Post* all displaying headlines of the event.

¹⁵⁵ According to Hunter S. Thompson's account, during which time he lived with the Hells Angels.

¹⁵⁶ D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010): 950.

culture. The supposed fascination these young girls had with the motorcyclists is a common theme throughout motorcycle culture. Women are usually “represented as personifying “straight” society... through which the bikers can exact their rage and frustration at the very world against which they rebel,”¹⁵⁷ aligning well with the events of the Monterey rape and numerous scenes in *The Wild Angels*. According to visual and newspaper interpretations; women were dangerously drawn towards motorcyclists.



The posters advertising *The Wild Angels* was equally as outrageous as the movie itself. On the poster above - presumably written to shock the public, making them curious to see whether this was true - the Mama tagline reads, “the property of all the Angels... anyone - all of them.” The ‘Mama’ of the club was a woman - usually of a slightly older age - who is known to be sexually available to all of the men. The assumption that the women who accompany the

motorcyclists were sexually available

An advertisement for *The Wild Angels*. Directed by Roger Corman, Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1966.

¹⁵⁷ Perlman, “The Brief Ride.”

for most of their club is consistent in many visual sources from the 1960s. Hunter S. Thompson acknowledged within his writing that women often wore patches that read “property of the Angels”. Some women -- notably those who rode with the Satan’s Slaves motorcycle club -- even had the same declaration tattooed on their backsides.¹⁵⁸ Bill Osgerby claims women in biker movies are usually “mamas” that are sexually compliant to numerous men or “old ladies” that are submissive and often victims of sexual abuse.¹⁵⁹ When using Mulvey’s work and comparing it to that of Osgerby, it is difficult to find examples of other ways women are represented in biker movies, specifically in *The Wild Angels*.

Interestingly, also on the wanted poster style advertisement for *The Wild Angels*, Blues’ photo is accompanied with the text “has a monkey on his back,” presumably referring to Mike. With all the women shown on the back of the club member’s bikes, the role that women had amongst the club is made perfectly clear; present but not always welcome to join in. The reference line could be acknowledging that women were to travel on the back of a club member’s motorcycle instead of owning their own, like “hangers-on” or “old ladies”.¹⁶⁰ Yet, the reference could be to her ‘being on his back’ in terms of needing his approval constantly.

¹⁵⁸ Rubin, “MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR,” 367.

¹⁵⁹ Osgerby, “Sleazy Riders,” 106.

¹⁶⁰ Ben Cosgrove, “LIFE Rides With the Hells Angels, 1965,” *TIME*, 8 November 2014.



Many visual sources show that women typically

A member of the Hells Angels with his “hanger-on” taken by Bill Ray, 1965.

travelled on the back of men’s motorcycles (especially those who rode with male dominated outlaw clubs), making the reference in the poster accurate to an extent. You can see here in the photos taken for *LIFE* magazine that women photographed here only seem to travel in this way instead of owning their own motorcycle. Women owning their own motorcycle was uncommon, rarely photographed and shared after 1947, but did happen.¹⁶¹ Respectable women-only motorcycle clubs like the Motor Maids (founded in 1940) regularly met to enjoy their passion for the sport.¹⁶² Yet, the visual sources throughout the 1960s simply do

¹⁶¹Carol J. Auster, “Transcending Potential Antecedent Leisure Constraints: The Case of Women Motorcycle Operators,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 33 (2001): 273.

¹⁶² Bill Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth: How the Original Cowboy of the Road Became the Easy Rider of the Silver Screen*, (Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2005), 105.

not acknowledge women enjoying riding a motorcycle by themselves¹⁶³, declaring that motorcycling was a man's sport.

A "hangers-on" perspective

When exploring the Hells Angels' attitudes towards women, an interview that followed the explosion of media attention in 1964 gives more of an insight into the inner workings of the sexes within the Hells Angels. The documentary in question was created by the news channel CBS, who filmed the report to shed light on the lifestyle of the outlaw club following the release of the Lynch report.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, interviews with the Hells Angels in response to the Lynch report acknowledged the woman's place within the club. A young girl called Donna McClain (shown in the picture below, taken by Bill Ray for *LIFE*) who rides with the Hells Angels explains that she chooses to ride with "not so much the fellas, the club."¹⁶⁵ Agreeing with Ray's statement, she goes on to state that "nobody forces me to do anything I don't wanna do" which questions the assumption of rape and domestic abuse the media tended to promote.¹⁶⁶ Women with low self-esteem dominated images of motorcycle culture, especially biker movies, making Donna a unique perspective. The differences between the reality of living with the Hells Angels and the Hollywood version is simple;

¹⁶³ Randy D McBee, *Born To Be Wild: The Rise of the American Motorcyclist*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 210.

¹⁶⁴ As briefly mentioned, the attorney general of California published a document in 1965 stating the crimes committed by the Hells Angels following the Monterey rape and how law enforcement need to crack down on these motorcyclists. The document became known as the Lynch report.

¹⁶⁵ When asked "why do you ride a motorcycle?" the 453 female riders that took part in the survey answered in these five categories: 1) freedom and independence; 2) outdoors, fresh air, and nature; 3) fun and pleasure; 4) family; and 5) being with friends and meeting people. It is also key to note that most women took up motorcycling because of friends or family influence and a general exposure to the sport. Auster, "Transcending Potential Antecedent Leisure Constraints, 284.

¹⁶⁶ I presume this by taking the events listed within the Lynch report that - according to Hunter S. Thompson's account of the report - women were almost always the victim of crimes committed by the Hells Angels, usually sexual assault or rape.

movies envisioned a sensationalised version of reality in order to profit from ticket sales, further adding to the biker frenzy that was dominating 1960s California.



When discussing the violent behaviour the media

Donna McLain sits at a table with Hells Angel members, taken by Bill Ray 1965.

usually associated with the Hells Angels, Donna hesitates, then explains how if she does “anything wrong, [she] gets pushed around,” so she does her best not to. Easily the most awkward aspect of the interview, Donna admits that the topic of male dominance is “hard to explain” and soon diverts attention to how her love for the Angels is the central aspect of her life. Giving a slight insight into how the club works, Donna says how she would eventually like to get a house and a job, only separating herself from the club when “the guys don’t want her anymore”, leading me to assume that the men ultimately decide who rides with the club. Donna seems to be an independent and strong-willed young woman,

declaring that she is “too good to be manhandled”¹⁶⁷ by the likes of the air force men who she previously had experiences with. Her attitude is rather different to that of the females we see in *The Wild Angels*, with Donna’s headstrong views creating a stark contrast to Mike’s desperation for Blues’ affection. However, despite her headstrong attitude, it is clear from hearing Donna’s experience that the traditional patriarchal system of the Hells Angels as seen in various imagery, is based on reality. Her attitude was strong when one of the men tries to interrupt her, noting an admirable quality in a world where it is believed women’s views were either restricted or non-existent thanks to male motorcyclists’ dominance. Donna’s perspective is an interesting addition to the typical attributes attached to women in motorcycle culture who “have no say”¹⁶⁸ -- as acknowledged by Sonny Barger -- and are therefore exploited in visual representations. Donna’s perspective is just one example of personal and lived experience with the Hells Angels that unfortunately I could not expand upon due to the scope of this research project.

The lack of female presence in cinematic depictions may have just been a reflection on the interactions between the sexes where outlaw motorcycle clubs were concerned. When looking at the photographs in *LIFE*, the women were often left out of meetings, discussions and even certain bars, simply because of their gender. It was common knowledge that only men could be initiated in to the Hells Angels. This segregated attitude is further evidence of how these motorcyclists attempted to reinforce gender roles, by exerting their authority over the inferior female position. The exclusion of women in the Hells Angels strikes a

¹⁶⁷ The full CBS news report can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzgMD7e_8zQ The interview that includes Donna is 54:18-1:42:25.

¹⁶⁸ Sonny Barger (founder of the Hells Angels) answers a question posed by the media regarding the Angel’s decision to fight in Vietnam if needed. After declaring sternly that “there are no women in the Hells Angels”, he says that the girlfriends “have no say about it”. <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/225552> 5:48.

familiar chord to that of working men's clubs, with a specific headquarters and set of rules that must be abided by. The initiation process of the Hells Angels is yet another failure for the female gender as the those wanting to join needed to bring a woman to a meeting where all of the club members could sleep with her.¹⁶⁹ During his stay with the Hells Angels, Thompson gives a brief description of the women who rode with the club...

"The girls stood quietly in a group, wearing tight slacks, kerchiefs and sleeveless blouses or sweaters, with boots and dark glasses, uplift bras, bright lipstick and the blank, wary expressions of half-bright souls turned mean and nervous from from too much bitter wisdom in too few years. Like the Angels, the girls were mainly in their twenties - although some were obvious teenagers and a few were ageing whores looking forward to a healthy outdoor weekend."¹⁷⁰



Thompson's description coincides with photographs captured in the 1965 *LIFE* photographs, with there being

"something kind of sad and at the same time defiant about the atmosphere."¹⁷¹

This particular quote was describing Bill Ray's favourite photograph of his time

Ruthie repeatedly plays the same song after drinking all day, inside the Blackboard Cafe, taken by Bill Ray 1965.

with the Hells Angels, pictured above. During his time with the Angels, Ray acknowledges the bizarre relations between the club, and the women who chose to ride with them,

"One thing about the Angels that I found especially fascinating," Ray says, "and something I'd never given much thought to before I started photographing them, was the role that the women played in the club. The girls weren't there in chains, or against their will. They had to want that life if they were going to be accepted by the Angels. These guys were kings of the road. I don't think they ever felt they had to look around for girls. Girls came, and they had their pick. Then they'd tell them where to sit and what to do."¹⁷²

Advertisements

Throughout popular culture, the “eroticized pairing of beautiful women and powerful machines,”¹⁷³ has been used relentlessly. With a biker frenzy engulfing much of 1960s popular culture, the style associated with the motorcyclist became a hit with the ‘it’ girls of the era.¹⁷⁴ Models and actresses like Brigitte Bardot and Ann-Margret (Elvis Presley’s *Viva Las Vegas* co-star (1964)) adopted ‘biker chic’ in the mid to late 1960s, with advertisements and movies following suit.¹⁷⁵ The recognisable patched, greasy Levi’s worn by the Hells Angels initiated a style explosion that was later adopted by the fashion industry.¹⁷⁶ During the CBS news report mentioned previously, one of the women who is riding with the Hells Angels is questioned on her choice of attire, whether she would prefer to wear “fancy,

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth*, 106.

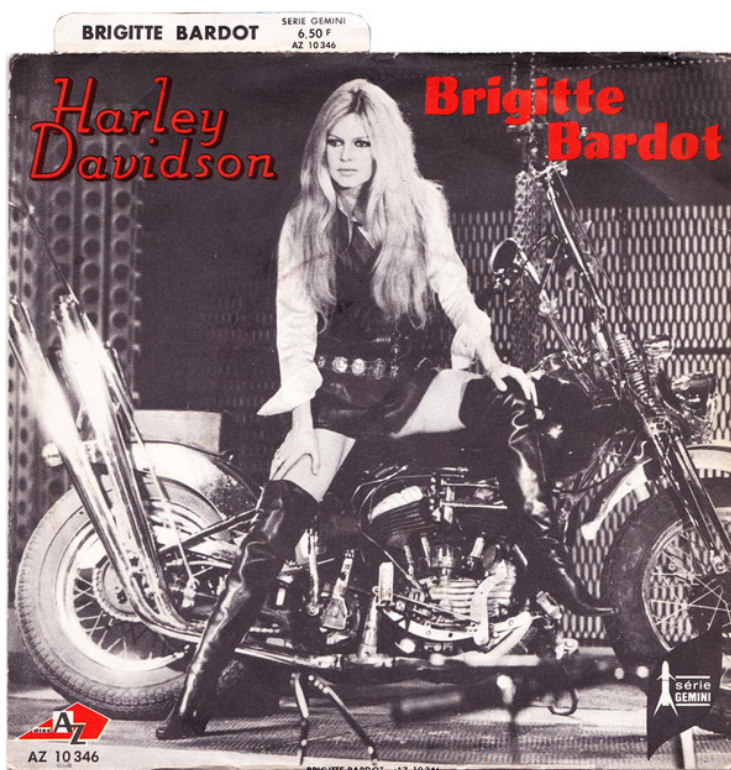
¹⁷⁴ Austin, Gagne, Orend, “Commodification,” 955.

¹⁷⁵ Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth*, 106.

¹⁷⁶ In the late 1980s many catwalk designers began bringing themes of leather and chrome with distressed denim to the masses. The aesthetic became so popular that Harley Davidson launched their own branded clothes in 1989. Even today, the leather jacket, or otherwise known as the ‘biker jacket’ has become a staple in many women’s wardrobes.

pretty dresses.”¹⁷⁷ Donna points out that she owns many nice clothes, but it is more the time and place that dictates what she feels like wearing, acknowledging that pretty clothes are not the most practical when riding motorcycles, which is what she loves to do (despite imagery promoting that women never rode themselves).

As the motorcycle became a commodity, it appears so did the women posing next to it. Bridgitte Bardot’s advertisement for Harley Davidson is a perfect example of this. Wearing an almost entire leather outfit, with a mini skirt and thigh high boots, Bardot sings, “the vibrations of my bike, make me hot, in my crotch”.¹⁷⁸ One of the most beautiful stars singing



The cover of the EP for *Harley Davidson*, performed by Bridgitte Bardot, written by Serge Gainsbourg, (Paris: Studios Barclay-Hoche Enregistrements) 10 December 1967. Cover artwork printed by Dillard et Cie. Imp. Paris.

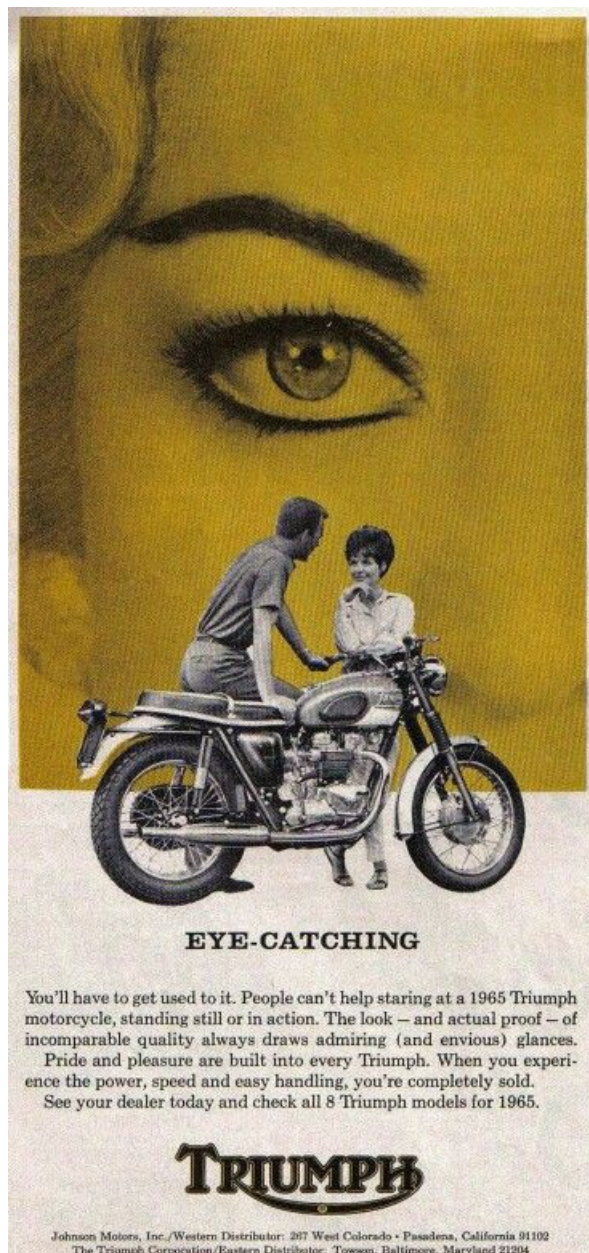
¹⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6-mTEMGmEU> 55:31.

¹⁷⁸ Serge Gainsbourg, “Harley Davidson” performed by Bridgitte Bardot, 1968.

about her love for a motorcycle - also a star in the eyes of the media and film - was a simple, yet effective recipe for success. This is where the ‘leather clad woman straddling a motorcycle’ in advertising originated.

Bardot singing for Harley Davidson is not the only time women were used as instrument to sell motorcycles. In numerous 1960s advertisements, there is often a

woman leaning against the bike or even more obviously, paying sexual attention to the male owner of the motorcycle. The idea that the motorcycle owner is suave and a both successful financially and socially is a common theme in many manufacturers advertisements, which is a fascinating contrast to usual assumptions of motorcyclists associated with criminal and outlaw activity.

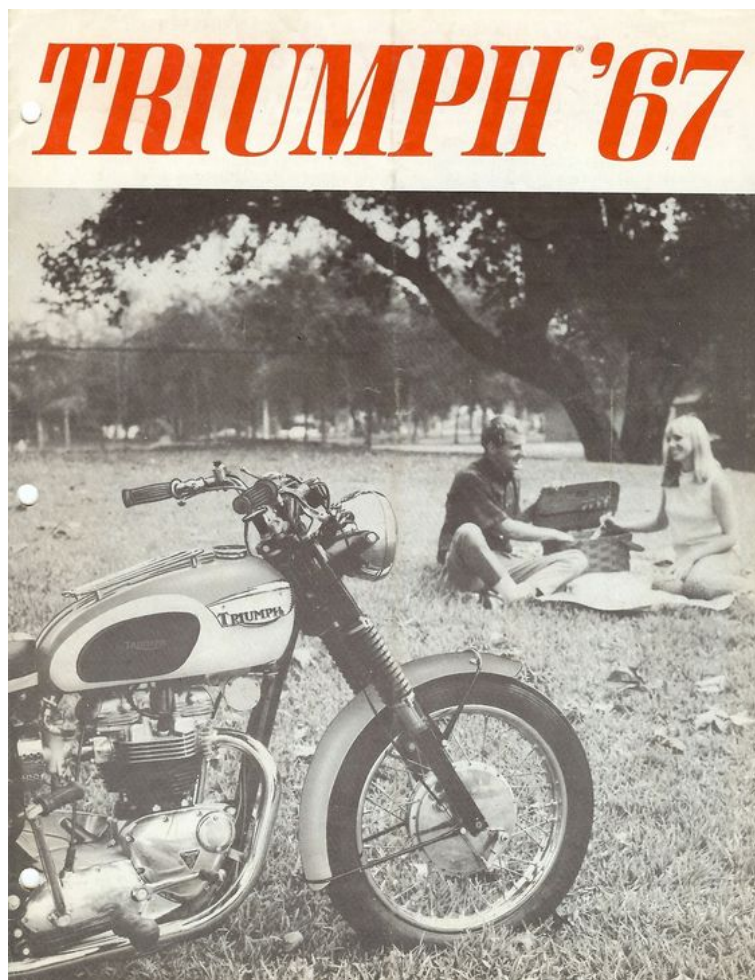


An advertisement for Triumph Motorcycles, 1965.

In the photograph below you can clearly see the large female eye dominating the image. With the headline “eye catching” underneath the motorcyclist and the woman flirting, it is quite obviously denoting how owning a motorcycle will instantly make you catch the eye of the opposite sex. However, motorcyclists tended to be eye catching for unfavorable reasons thanks to newspapers relentless attention on the Hells Angels.¹⁷⁹

Another interesting aspect within the advertisements of both Harley Davidson and Triumph in the 1960s is how motorcycles were shown to be family friendly in the late 1960s. This was an attempt on the

manufacturer's behalf to reclaim their reputation following outlaw club's behaviour became associated certain brands of motorcycle. Here in the advertisement below, we can see a couple enjoying a picnic on a summers day with their Triumph parked in front of them. The motorcycle allowed you to travel much more freely than in a car, addressed here as a selling point, with the mobilisation of the vehicle a perfect way of enjoying a civilised afternoon in the park with the husband. Yet the mobilisation of motorcycles was almost always used as a negative attribute of the motorcycle as it meant the criminals of such outlaw clubs like the



An advertisement for Triumph Motorcycles, 1967.

Hells Angels could easily travel to YOUR town and terrorise YOUR local community. The image makes the motorcycle seem accessible to everyone without the negative connotations attached to bike ownership, with the media's tainted portrayal of those who owned a motorcycle as connected with criminal activity.

Women Riders

As a valuable counter argument, the importance of women's

own motorcycle history is one that should be emphasised and reiterated. Attempting to find statistical evidence of women owning motorcycles has proved to be extremely difficult. The Motor Maids are a rare occurrence in the world of motorcycling. Not only was this all female club founded by three women whose riding ability awarded them numerous championship wins, but the club continues to this day. Following an unanswered email, I discovered the ongoing events organised by the Motor Maids via their facebook page. Amongst photographs of group outings in the club's traditional dress; royal blue shirts with accompanying white waistcoats and white trousers, there was one interesting photograph regarding the club's founding in 1940. The caption of the photograph reads, "found some Motor Maid history while exploring Las Vegas. The shop didn't even know who these pioneering women were. They do now."¹⁸⁰ The women in the photograph are the founding members of the club; Dot Smith, Linda Dugeau and Dot Robinson.¹⁸¹ By 1940, Dot Robinson won the famous Jack Pine Endurance Trophy in the sidecar class, becoming the first woman to win an American Motorcycle Association national competition, proving that -- despite mainstream imagery -- women riders did exist and were successful.

¹⁸⁰ MOTOR MAIDS facebook page, 16th January 2017.

(<https://www.facebook.com/472045482901550/photos/a.532027230236708.1073741829.472045482901550/1032898446816248/?type=3&theater>)

¹⁸¹ After learning of the Ninety-Nine club - a women's only pilot club - Linda Dugeau questioned why a similar group did not exist for motorcycling. Dugeau approached Dot Robinson during the Laconia National in 1940 about the potential club. Together, after three years of searching, they found 50 women riders and the Motor Maids was founded.

Three Motor Maids members with a photograph of Dot Smith, Linda Dugeau and Dot Robinson, photographer unknown, 16 January 2017.



The ongoing tradition of sensationalised headlines began in 1947 at the Hollister riot, where the first annual American Motorcycle Association met following the second world War. Another aspect of the press for the Hollister riot is the decision to exclude the female presence. The Tracy Gear Jammers motorcycle club¹⁸² (see below). Randy McBee discusses

¹⁸²Sarah Hoiland, "Impromptu Fiesta or Havoc in Hollister: A Seventy Year Retrospective," *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 14 (2018).

how women were involved in motorcycle culture right from the events of Hollister in 1947, with initial reports stating how, “riders, both men and women, steered their machines into bars, crashing fixtures, furniture, bottles and mirrors,”¹⁸³ yet the female participation was almost entirely ignored by media sources including newspapers and television reports. Women associated with motorcycle culture were often described by the media as a victim¹⁸⁴ -- as previously mentioned -- a “friend,” or a second rider, with women motorcyclist’s names only included in news reports when they were injured¹⁸⁵, despite the

¹⁸³ C.J. Doughty Jr., “Havoc in Hollister,” San Francisco Chronicle, July 6 1947, 1, 11; “Motorcyclists Put Town In An Uproar,” New York Times, July 7, 1947.

¹⁸⁴ McBee, *Born To Be Wild*, 210.

¹⁸⁵ Rubin, “MAKE LOVE MAKE WAR, 210.

relatively considerable number of women who rode with the Hells Angels. *The Wild Angels* is a perfect example of how imagery declared women had no connection to motorcycle

culture aside from their fascination with it.

Another pioneering female rider that was unfortunately excluded from motorcycle culture's visual narrative was Bessie Stringfield. With only eighteen women out of approximately 431 people celebrated in the American Motorcycle Associations hall of fame, Bessie Stringfield's attitude towards motorcycling resulted in an award named in her honour, given to those women "who are leaders on



motorcycling.”¹⁸⁶ From working for the army as a civilian motorcycle courier in world war

A collage of photographs of the Tracy Gear Jammers motorcycle club at the Hollister riot, 4 July 1947, photographer unknown.

two, to the eight long distance journeys she took alone, often

¹⁸⁶Bessie Stringfield's full profile on the AMA Hall of Fame can be found here: <http://www.motorcyclemuseum.org/halloffame/detail.aspx?RacerID=277&lpos=0px&letter=S&txtFname=bessie&rblFname=S&txtLname=stringfield&rblLname=S&discipline=0>

seeking a bed at other coloured Americans homes (this seemed safer during a time of racial tensions), Stringfield redefined the gender boundaries when it came to motorcycling. She owned twenty-seven Harley-Davidson's during her lifetime and was brave enough to ride through the deep south during "the era when racial prejudice was a threat to her safety." A true inspiration to female riders, despite Stringfield being denied prize winner status at a flat track race in the 1950s when the officials realized she was a woman, she went on to be known as the "motorcycle queen of Miami"¹⁸⁷.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of gathering sources and various perspectives of motorcycle culture, I can confidently conclude that motorcycle culture would simply not exist without the extensive amount of images circulated in the 1960s. This visual culture included *The Wild One*, *Easy Rider*, *The Wild Angels* and the entirety of the biker movie genre¹⁸⁸, to advertisements and most importantly, media outlets including newspapers and television reports. These images used the complex relations between the sexes as a means to add fuel to the fire of motorcycle controversy. The stereotype that the motorcyclists often have is that they are rough, tough and take whatever they want, women included. Unfortunately, this means that women and motorcycles is a combination that often involved sex or violence, or both. With movies depicting the motorcyclist as the leather-clad, filthy, raping and pillaging type outlaw, the national fear continued throughout the decade, with women as the main victims of their aggression. From the Monterey rape in 1964 and the events

¹⁸⁷ Osgerby, *Biker, Truth or Myth*, 105.

¹⁸⁸ See the appendix of biker movies on 128.

shown -- that included many Hells Angels of the Oakland chapter¹⁸⁹ -- in *The Wild Angels*, the motorcyclist was the villain of the 1960s. The biker movie genre thrived on the public's fascination with these mobile criminals, leading many depictions to be linked with motorcycle culture, exaggerated for an added shock factor. It is when the movie representation is compared to news reports that the imagery of motorcycle culture becomes problematic for women.

The media wanted to sell newspapers and keep television ratings high, using the outlaw motorcyclist as a vital tool -- and endless pool of 'news' -- for shocking headlines. As mentioned within the explanation of the Monterey rape incident, the specifics of the case were never finalised, meaning no one will ever know what happened. At that time however, it seems that most news outlets and of course, cinema, enjoyed popularity and financial gain from exploiting the idea of outlaw bikers being a villain of American society. Also, I am unsure whether the Lynch report would have ever existed without the intervention and consistency of the American press. The contents of the Lynch report are thin, but as are numerous claims by the newspapers accusing the Hells Angels of repetitive crimes.

Advertisements are a unique example of 1960s motorcycle culture as the depictions are often strikingly different to other imagery of the decade. Of course, these images' primary goal is to sell the manufacturer's product. By showing the sex appeal that the motorcyclist will have when owning his very own model, surely every man in America would want one? Adverts needed to continue the element of the motorcycle's sex appeal in order to sell their product. However, this sex appeal needed to appear trendy, not malicious, as shown in

¹⁸⁹ Osgerby, "Sleazy Riders," 104.

movies and news reports. In both reality -- with the Monterey rape -- and cinematic depictions of the biker like *Easy Rider*, teenage girls find motorcyclists to be attractive due to their outlaw status. This status applied to them because of their choice of attire and transportation; making them an enemy to the local townspeople whilst being a hit with the young women. The goal these advertisements had were a stark difference to cinematic depictions, that usually consisted of rape, abuse and violence, while attempting to continue the fashionable status the motorcycle had. Despite appearing more 'family friendly', these adverts add to the assumption that women will be sexually available to any man if he owns a motorcycle. The advertisements created by Harley Davidson required a certain level of civilisation and dignity as a means of reclaiming their reputation.¹⁹⁰ As the Hells Angels motorcycle of choice was Harley Davidson -- albeit stripped down, or 'bobbed'¹⁹¹ -- the manufacturer was unfortunately tainted for the masses by the association of criminal lifestyles of outlaw motorcyclists.

The biker movie genre makes it clear that women would never be the protagonists of biker movies,¹⁹² they would only ever be used as accessories to male bikers; much like the motorcycle itself, but perhaps given less respect. Women were pivotal to the formation of motorcycle culture's image, but were ultimately marginalised due to the incredibly patriarchal system clubs like the Hells Angels and the subsequent imagery in pop culture represented. The AMA only addressed women riders in their hall of fame in the early 2000s,

¹⁹⁰ This was because Harley Davidson was the motorcycle of choice of the Hells Angels. The motorcycle club would take a model and strip it of all chrome, leaving the bike simple and usually black. Even by 1969, Harley Davidson refused to give two motorcycles for *Easy Rider* as they feared it would damage their reputation by being associated with promoting outlaw club's lifestyle.

¹⁹¹ Hells Angels interview with Geraldo Rivera, 1974: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6-mTEMGmEU>

¹⁹² I recognise that some biker movies use women as main characters; for example, *Hells Belles* (1969), yet the sexualisation of these women is simply used for the viewers pleasure (usually male), adding to the patriarchal nature of motorcycle culture.

making seventy years of patriarchal narrative by the organisation that were responsible for creating the 'outlaw' motorcyclist in the 1940s.

The way women interacted with the motorcycle and its culture was of course, rather different to how it was depicted in wider social images. Unfortunately, we many never fully understand what life was like for the women who rode with the Hells Angels, as their history was hardly documented. One aspect that almost all of the sources have in common is that women and motorcycles are inextricably linked. Whether that be women's fascination with the Triumph owner, or the appeal of living amongst a group of social outcasts like the Hells Angels, one thing is for certain: despite the abuse associated with the motorcyclist, images of the 1960s depicted that women loved motorcycles.

As I will discuss further in the final conclusion, motorcycle culture was incredibly gendered. Not only by the riders themselves, (for example, the Hells Angels is widely known and accepted as a male only club) but the images that represent it. As discussed in this chapter, *The Wild Angels* follow the traditional theme of biker movies, by focusing the plot on the male characters, using women in specific ways -- both for visual pleasure and satisfying the viewer's thirst for violent cinema -- where the male continues the biker narrative undisturbed by female distraction. These exploitation movies exaggerated the lifestyles of the Hells Angels to entice youthful audiences with a thirst for rebellion to attend drive-ins and local cinemas. Again, the advertisements for such movies abuse the female presence by addressing their sexual availability for shock factor, affirming the idea that women are 'monkeys' or 'hangers-on' and therefore subject to male dominance (whether that be non-consensual sex or violence).

Amongst the abuse, aggression and violence women of motorcycling endured, one of the saddest parts of motorcycling history is the lack of recognition and praise talented and brave women riders received. The success of women riders at both competitions and challenging gender and racial stereotyping in employment, went against the grain of imagery representing motorcycle culture. These women were marginalised due to their love of motorcycles setting them aside from the 'women as victim' box that images relentlessly put them in. I hope to see women motorcyclists addressed and celebrated in academia in the future.

Conclusion: The Sanitisation of Motorcycle History

“PRIMITIVE, UNBRIDLED, BRAVE, UNCOMPLICATED, AND ULTIMATELY ROMANTIC.”

Ted Polhemus in Matthew Drutt ed. *The Art of the Motorcycle*. New York: Guggenheim, 1998. 55.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, the culture that surrounded the eruption and controversies of the motorcycle experienced a sanitisation. In light of all the images I have discussed in the past three chapters, regarding various crimes, events and differing representations of the biker and his interactions with women and the counterculture, I will finish this thesis by discussing how the general perception and depiction of motorcycling shifted from violent, to admirable. From the associations of drug abuse, sexual assault and generally terrorising small towns across America thanks to media representations, it seems that with the 1998 Guggenheim exhibition, *the Art of the Motorcycle*, the biker had become recognised as a style icon of American history.

The Art of The Motorcycle

The opening of *The Art of the Motorcycle*¹⁹³ fifty years after the initial rise of the biker is an incredibly intriguing addition to the narrative of motorcycle culture. The travelling exhibition consisted of over 100 bikes placed within clean white displays, and created the narrative of worldwide motorcycle culture from a very specific, viewer friendly perspective, one that glossed over the less attractive aspects of motorcycle culture including the unjustified

¹⁹³ Matthew Drutt ed. *The Art of the Motorcycle*. New York: Guggenheim, 1998. Exhibition catalogue.

treatment of women, extensive felonies committed and drugs abused (and allegedly sold). What the exhibition does express however, is the importance of motorcycle culture in film, music and fashion. To give an insight into the displays, Jim McCraw reviews the exhibition for the New York Times, describing the presentation as,

“... simple, straightforward and uncluttered... Each bike is held up on its tires, not by its kickstand or center stand, but by tiny nonintrusive cables and wedges of clear plastic, to give the impression that each bike stands on its own. The information about each is printed directly on the floor. The walls are stark white, and bare, with the exception of a historic-placement blurb at the start of each section, and there is plenty of light on the subjects.”¹⁹⁴

In one area of the gallery, the walls were covered with stainless-steel panels to mimic the chromed motorcycles, designed by Los Angeles architect Frank O. Gehry. Motorcycles were then displayed all along the upward sweeping ramp in chronological order of creation from the 1868 French velocipede up to the newest models of 1998, each machine paired with a brief explanation.¹⁹⁵ Placing a variety of motorcycles in a white cube environment is a fascinating visual juxtaposition. From researching motorcycling and its complex history, the motorcycle embodies everything that exclusive institutions like the Guggenheim does not. However, it proved to be a genius way of commodifying the image of the biker. *The Art of the Motorcycle* was the most popular exhibition in the Guggenheim’s history at the time of its opening in 1998 – more visitors than the retrospectives of Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein -- with visitor attendance increased by forty-five percent, many of whom

¹⁹⁴ Jim McCraw, “Art That Stands On Its Own Two Wheels,” *New York Times*, 10th July 1998.

¹⁹⁵ Carol Vogel, “Latest Biker Hangout? Guggenheim Ramp,” *New York Times*, 3 August 1998.

would not usually enter an institution such as this, only making an exception for the subject matter at hand. Aside from ticket sales, the merchandise for *the Art of the Motorcycle* included clothing such as T-shirts, windbreakers, a Ducatti leather all-in-one, along with mugs, beach blankets, a henna tattoo kit, posters and postcards. The catalogue alone (which was \$85 for the hardback and \$45 for the paperback) was printed over 30,000 times and reprinted due to high demand.¹⁹⁶ This expressed the financial possibilities for exhibitions that successfully merge an already popular product within a strategic large scale advertisement fronted by a fine art institution. The exhibition was sponsored by BMW, which would of course be financially invested in the potential sales from visitors, and therefore would require a specific aesthetic of the motorcycle rider, in order to keep their brand associated with positive cultural elements of motorcycling history.

The Art of the Motorcycle virtually erased all attributes of the displayed bikes that did not fit into the realm of cinema or popular culture in order to create a family friendly visual history of motorcycling.¹⁹⁷ The information regarding the vehicles in the exhibition discuss the motorcycle from an engineering perspective, focusing upon the logistics and business aspects of the sport, mentioning briefly the lasting impact the outlaw biker had upon American society. Of course, my knowledge is limited as I was less than a year old when the Guggenheim opened the exhibition. However, from what I have read about the general content of the display, the distinct lack of cultural context accompanied with the exclusivity of the display does not explore the history of the motorcycle outside of cultural

¹⁹⁶ Vogel, "Latest Biker Hangout?"

¹⁹⁷ According to reviews I have found to better understand the exhibition, the information surrounding the impact of motorcycling on visual pop culture was displayed in its own separate section, leaving the labels for each motorcycle to describe specific mechanical points of interest.

generalisations and notable mechanical traits of each machine. The exhibition's material is, unsurprisingly, written in a way that ignores most negative attributes of the lifestyle surrounding the biker. Although disappointing, since these negative representations are what made the biker both famous and part of America's cultural history,¹⁹⁸ it is clear that the exhibition required the commodification of the biker image in order to reap the financial rewards in both ticket, merchandise and motorcycle sales. The positive image of the motorcycle and its rider is needed within the realm of manufacturers in order to remain a successful business, making the Guggenheim's focus on the motorcycle a business transaction fronted by a respected art museum. The exhibition constructs a specific narrative that glorifies the biker into a rebel of society. Yes, the outlaw motorcyclist was a rebel, but the variety of depictions are far more complex. He was also often shown to be a criminal, a rapist, or a drug addict. The Hells Angels were not all hybrids of *The Wild One's* Johnny. Yet, the Guggenheim exhibition strategically focused on the 'coolness' the biker embodied, leaving out some vitally important themes and events. For example, there was no mention of women's motorcycle clubs, or in fact, any women of motorcycle history.

The exhibition catalogue addresses what was a complex time to be young, since the 1960s was overshadowed with the fear of nuclear obliteration, an unjust military presence in Southeast Asia that was dividing the nation, along with the youth's struggle growing up in a social system that seemed stale and outdated. The focus on rock 'n' roll is a nod to the rebellious characteristic of the biker - but to deliberately ignore Meredith Hunter, the seventeen year old African American who was stabbed to death by the Hells Angels acting

¹⁹⁸ It may be too bold to say, but by ignoring the fundamental premise on which motorcycle culture began, it is ignoring what essentially made the motorcyclist known in mainstream society, and therefore, one of the reasons the exhibition could even be made possible (and financially successful).

as security at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, signifies that this exhibition was simply a business strategy. The narrative *The Art of the Motorcycle* constructed unfortunately has left behind many powerful visual sources and perspectives that contributed to what motorcycle culture has become. The American biker is a strange and complex phenomenon, that deserves an exploration deeper than the assumption that all motorcyclists were simply draft card burning type-rebels. The tensions between the outlaw motorcyclist and the counterculture -- that I discussed in the second chapter -- are clearly more complicated than simply addressing both subcultures as one like-minded group of rebellious social outcasts.

The exhibition catalogue separates the motorcycle history into decades of the twentieth century. The section of the 1960s is almost completely focusing on *Easy Rider*, with a brief mention of social context, specifically the Vietnam conflict. The sublime landscapes of the film juxtapose the fate of Hopper and Fonda, which provides a poignant way to question the state of the nation of the time. The film's ending makes the counterculture outlaw biker hybrid shown in the film a martyr and a victim of its generation's social turbulence, leaving the motorcycle as its lasting emblem. Yet, this movie is far too complex -- and problematic¹⁹⁹ -- in its depiction of the motorcyclist to be used as an example for a decade of differing visual representations. As the exhibition was funded by BMW, the elements of freedom and other such notions attached to the frontier is exploited visually, further denoting, or justifying why this form of transportation is described as 'art' by the Guggenheim. Or, more importantly, a commodifiable form of art. In a sense, the biker -- as discussed in the first

¹⁹⁹ In terms of the relationship between the outlaw motorcyclist and the counterculture.

chapter -- embodies the romanticism of the frontier and the values (however morally questionable)²⁰⁰ that the Country was founded upon.

"Lose the Watches."

Decades following events like the Monterey rape and the murder of Meredith Hunter at Altamont, it seems that 1960s motorcycle culture is simply associated with *Easy Rider*. A good example of this is discussed above, with *The Art of the Motorcycle* exhibition focusing on *Easy Rider* almost exclusively within a decade of motorcycle history. There has been countless references to *Easy Rider* in popular culture in recent years, as acknowledged in the Guggenheim exhibition. Movies including *The Terminator* series (began 1984) and *Wild Hogs*²⁰¹ (2007), with the latter taking what seems to be direct inspiration from *Easy Rider*'s wide landscape shots, along with the notion of finding freedom within American society, giving the concept a modern edge and even a brief cameo of Fonda himself. The 2017 Mercedes Benz advertisement for the Superbowl²⁰² is a testament to the extent of *Easy Rider*'s influence. As a satirical (?) depiction of an outlaw motorcycle club, the bar/clubhouse has a shrine to *Easy Rider* with the teardrop gas tank and a jukebox that only has one song; *Born to be Wild* by Steppenwolf. Peter Fonda even makes a cameo, wearing the signature American flag jacket -- of course -- but ditches his chopper for a Mercedes and proceeds to speed off into the sunset after blocking the bikers in. These examples are just a few among countless references, showing the scope of *Easy Rider*'s impact on American culture. Also, a

²⁰⁰ I am here referencing the genocide of the Native American people and the generally lawless social structure.

²⁰¹ Interestingly, the Hells Angels attempted to sue Disney (Buena Vista Motion Pictures) for using "its trademark design featuring a helmeted, horned and feathered skull" during both the movies' advertising and its content.

²⁰² Mercedes SuperBowl Advertisement, 5 February 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqh9pl89GuE>

general theme extracted from motorcycle culture's history -- mostly thanks to Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* -- is the rebellious, sometimes dangerous, stylish attributes of the biker, which as a result, means, "the outlaw has taken on positive, attractive and often desirable connotations."²⁰³ As mentioned in chapter two, what became known as the 'biker jacket' is still an ongoing trend in fashion, becoming acknowledged as a wardrobe staple for both men and women.²⁰⁴

The 'New' Motorcycle Culture

Within a brief but significant article in the International Journal of Motorcycle Studies, Greg Semack asks "What Happened to My Motorcycle Movie?" Semack rewatches *Easy Rider* after thirty years and notices that "Hollywood falls short of reality," with the sweeping, wide shots of Hopper and Fonda riding on the open road. Expressing his disappointment in rewatching the film, Semack claims that there are no "good guys" in the movie, with the protagonists being drug dealers, Nicholson being an alcoholic and the hippy hitchhiker a social dropout. The only "hero" in the film is actually the motorcycle. As a tool that connects the whole movie together, the motorcycle "symbolises personal freedom" and gave people an attainable goal in life. What is important about Semack's opinion here is not his disappointment with *Easy Rider*, but rather his acknowledgement of the motorcycle being the element that is memorable and worthy of notice. I only agree to this statement when he addresses the "awesome" shots of Hopper and Fonda riding through the American Southwest at the beginning of the movie, since the motorcycle can only be visually

²⁰³ Drutt, *The Art of the Motorcycle*, 51.

²⁰⁴ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 946.

representative of freedom when shown in an effective location. The most obvious example would be Monument Valley. It is the pairing of these two in visual imagery that have linked the motorcycle to freedom, adopted and commodified by advertising.

Perhaps *Easy Rider* is best acknowledged as a testament of its time, alienated from the modern day when now revisited. Or, more realistically, Semack's opinion is shared by many due to the extensive visual abuse that the motorcycle has received in popular culture in the last fifty years. This new visual culture of the motorcycle has made the 1969 depiction seem diluted in comparison. As Semack states in his brief article, I think that the notion of the motorcycle on the open road -- as shown in the beginning of *Easy Rider* -- is the fundamental basis to which motorcycle culture stands, and was how the sanitisation and commodification of motorcycle culture began.²⁰⁵ The frontier romanticism attached to the open road stems quite clearly from these scenes, and has been extensively used to exhibit the sentimental aspects of motorcycling, with many discussions and depictions conveniently forgetting the unfavourable attributes of the outlaw biker, in order to continue this wistful, more financially rewarding view of motorcycling.²⁰⁶

As Theodor Adorno theorizes in his book, *The Culture Industry*, there are certain depictions and repetitive representations created to satisfy the public's craving for entertainment. Adorno carefully named this phenomenon "culture industry" rather than "mass culture" to decisively state that certain visual elements of popular culture do not emerge organically,

²⁰⁵ Carol J. Auster, "Transcending Potential Antecedent Leisure Constraints: The Case of Women Motorcycle Operators," *Journal of Leisure Research* 33 (2001): 284. As part of Auster's survey, over 35% of those who took part, answered "why do you ride a motorcycle?" with freedom and independence.

²⁰⁶ *The Art of the Motorcycle* is of course, a perfect example of this.

but rather deliberately. Adorno's theory would define all of the imagery within this thesis as 'trash led culture', yet I have adopted the culture industry is an appropriate theory regarding both high and low cultural phenomena. The specific representation of the motorcyclist is an interesting example of the culture industry with imagery associated with working class, especially when discussing how within the frame of the Guggenheim exhibition – an elitist institution -- the image of the motorcycle was commodified by a motorcycle manufacturer (BMW). The culture industry successfully fed consumers over thirty biker movies during the 1960s that all consisted of repetitive clichés and stereotypes, in order to "dull the senses".²⁰⁷ This proved successful, as youthful audiences thrived with the rebellious protagonists actions, thrilled in the experience of a lifestyle drastically different from their own. Those who thought these depictions were inappropriate were most likely fascinated by the idea of people living this way. Biker movies were the mindless entertainment that the youth wanted amongst the social complexities of the era.

It was with *Easy Rider*, that these clichés were replaced with newer, more wistful ones. Particularly, the romanticised depiction of a man free of social constraint riding a Harley Davidson on the American highway has been exploited by popular culture in order to generate a certain response in the viewer. *The Art of the Motorcycle* is one of the most fascinating contributions to the culture industry in regards to motorcycling. The tailor made exhibition is the epitome of adjusting a narrative for mass appeal, as the motorcycle was taken and adjusted to be associated with middle and upper classes. By carefully associating the 1960s motorcycling in America mostly to *Easy Rider*, the Guggenheim disregarded the offensive and often violent nature displayed in virtually all depictions of the outlaw

²⁰⁷ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 147.

motorcyclist and replaced them with a 'hippy biker' mold created with *Easy Rider*. It is this representation of the outlaw biker that has been commodified and rebranded, with the motorcycle being declared as a highbrow object of desire by the Guggenheim.

The role of writers like Theodor Adorno are useful in understanding why certain types of depictions of events result in a change of public's perception, but more importantly how these images of popular culture impact cultural trends,²⁰⁸ especially since the United States is considered to be the capitalist centre of the western world. When considering the concept of *The Art of the Motorcycle*, the specific representation of the motorcyclist 1969 onwards continue the idea that all bikers are "uninhibited, peace-seeking, free-spirited" rebels²⁰⁹ like Hopper and Fonda in *Easy Rider*, rather than the raping, pillaging outlaw shown in numerous movies released previously in the same decade, as shown in *The Wild Angels*. The way this specific perspective was then altered by an elitist institution is an interesting example of Adorno's culture industry in motion. *Easy Rider* ended the biker movie genre by altering the image of the biker into a 'hippy' outlaw, which was adopted by businesses as the best way to represent all motorcyclists in popular culture in order to sell products. Especially since previous to 1969, it seemed that most men associated with motorcycling were depicted as criminals and social outcasts. Due to their influence, I think that the Guggenheim played a significant role in the modern representation of the biker in popular culture.

²⁰⁸ In fashion trends (both garments and advertising), choices of movies being made, advertising techniques and music with its subsequent visual accompaniment.

²⁰⁹ D. Mark Austin, Patricia Gagne and Angela Orend, "Commodification and Popular Imagery of the Biker in American Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010): 952.

Adorno's argument of all artistic contributions to culture being driven by consumerism can also be applied to motorcycle culture by again, addressing that his theory is used in opposition of how he discussed. As mentioned previously, the shots of Hopper and Fonda on their bikes in the Southwest of America are the most memorable from the entire movie. These shots not only romanticise motorcycle culture but have influenced motorcycle advertising for the foreseeable future.²¹⁰ In addition to motorcycling, adverts for cars are often shown on an abandoned highway that is almost always conveniently empty. These further visual elements of freedom are a direct example of how film -- an artistic creation -- are exploited by the culture industry to push commodity culture.²¹¹ While it can be argued that *Easy Rider* represents freedom to the viewer, it can also be claimed that these scenes attempt to instill an idea in the viewer that they need a motorcycle in order to feel free and have these wonderful experiences.²¹²²¹³ Throughout this thesis I have included examples of motorcycle manufacturer advertisements to discuss differences in representations of the biker, with a more recent example below. The imagery within these adverts shows a continuation of the economically driven aspect of motorcycling, as corporations have been commodifying the motorcycle for decades. *The Art of the Motorcycle* exhibition continues this consumerist mentality, simply altering its initial presentation to the viewer as 'art' instead of obvious advertising. An interesting addition to imagery of the motorcycle in

²¹⁰ Austin, Gagne, Orend, "Commodification," 944.

²¹¹ Ibid., 945.

²¹² I intended to place an example of a recent Harley Davidson advertisement here to demonstrate how footage of a motorcycle on the open road is still consistently used today to instil this vision of freedom. However, when I searched for an example, practically all adverts followed the same pattern. To just search 'Harley Davidson advert' in a search engine, there are numerous. Here is one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gACfp-ZqAuw>

²¹³ The "about us" page on Harley Davidson's British website begins by simply stating "we fulfill dreams of personal freedom", next to a photo of (you guessed it) a man riding a motorcycle on the road, with a woman on the back seat. Further on, it is stated that Harley Davidson's ethos is, "independence, authenticity and the passion for being on the open road." Website: <https://www.harley-davidson.com/gb/en/about-us/company.html>

recent years is the bald eagle. As a symbol used in American imagery from 1782, “the eagle was displayed on official documents, currency, flags, public buildings and other government-related items”. As an emblem representative of traditional American values including freedom, the eagle now sits quite comfortably in American iconography. Today, the eagle had been adopted into motorcycle imagery also, with the pairing of the eagle and a Harley Davidson, along with the billowing stars and stripes.



A 2017 advertisement for a new range of Soft Tail bikes by Harley Davidson.

The Masculine Dominance of Motorcycling

As discussed in numerous points throughout this research dissertation, it is clear that motorcycle culture is incredibly gendered. Interestingly, despite the sanitisation of motorcycle history, the connotations of gender still remain as rigid as they were back in the 1960s. While the gritty aspects of the biker were left out of *The Art of the Motorcycle* and

numerous references to the Hells Angels and motorcyclists in recent popular culture, the male dominance has continued. Similar to Brigitte Bardot's declaration of love for Harley Davidson in 1968, the female continues to be depicted as an accessory to the motorcyclist. To the disappointment of the female rider, there is practically a genre of magazine that uses its covers to represent women as an object while the motorcycle demands the respect of the viewer. There is little acknowledgement of women's motorcycling, with women's motorcycle clubs only becoming recognised by the media within the past ten years. It is also interesting to note that the Hells Angels still do not let women become members.

In terms of areas that need developing in motorcycle culture research and academia, I believe that there is an embarrassing lack of attention on female riders within the rise of the outlaw biker in 1960s America. During my short time in researching and writing, I have been limited to the extent I can research women in motorcycling, whilst keeping the core of the thesis focused and on track. This is because of the limited amount of writing on the subject, along with strictly staying focused on my area of research. Therefore, there is an opportunity for a comprehensive exploration into women's motorcycle clubs, or women riders' achievements that have unfortunately been left out of motorcycle history. Also, despite the extensive acknowledgement of the western genre within motorcycle popular culture, there are only a handful of academics that have made a direct correlation between a specific example of biker culture -- in this case, *Easy Rider*, as explored in chapter one -- and the western themes that are shown within. It would be exciting to see more discussions of the biker movie genre and its various links to American culture at the time, and how these references have been adopted into wider popular culture today. The depiction of the motorcyclist from 1945 until present day, focusing on America -- and possibly its influence

upon other countries -- has potential for a PhD research project, that I will in the future undertake. The exploration of the motorcycle as 'sign' will make a key addition to the emerging academia of motorcycle studies.

This project has been a fascinating and rewarding experience to both research and write. Although difficult and slightly infuriating at times -- specifically to learn and then articulate the ways women were treated within the realm of motorcycle culture -- investigating the origins of motorcycling and the incredible importance images had upon its complex rise to fame in the 1960s has been more complex than I anticipated. It is astonishing the power that images can have, with cinematic contributions to visual culture making a remarkable and permanent impact on American culture in the form of the outlaw motorcyclist. I am curious as to whether the outlaw biker would have been a phenomenon without *The Wild One*, and possibly more importantly, whether the biker lifestyle would still be as persistent today without the idealistic portrayal of riding on the open road in *Easy Rider*.

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Biker Movie Appendix 1960-1969

Previous to 1960

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The Wild One. Directed by Laszlo Benedek, Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1953.

Motorcycle Gang. Directed by Edward L. Cahn, Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1957.

1963

The Great Escape. Directed by John Sturges, Los Angeles: The Mirisch Company, 1963.²¹⁴

Scorpio Rising. Directed by Kenneth Anger, Los Angeles: Puck Film Productions, 1963.

The Damned. Directed by Joseph Losey, Culver City: Columbia Picture, 1963.

1964

The Leather Boys. Directed by Gillian Freeman, London: Raymond Stross Productions, 1964.

²¹⁴ I include *The Great Escape* on this list specifically because of the use of the Steve McQueen's motorcycle in large amounts of advertising for the movie. Despite the motorcycle playing such a small role, the amount of advertising and memorabilia of the movie includes the shots of McQueen on the motorcycle.

1965

Motorpsycho. Directed by Russ Meyer, Eve Productions, 1965.

1966

The Wild Angels. Directed by Roger Corman, Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1966.

1967

Hells Angels on Wheels. Directed by Richard Rush, Los Angeles: Fanfare Films, 1967.

The Born Losers. Directed by dir. Tom Laughlin, Los Angeles: Fanfare Films, 1967.

The Glory Stompers. Directed by Anthony M. Lanza, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1967.

The Wild Rebels. Directed by William Greffe, Beverly Hills: Crown International Pictures, 1967.

Devil's Angels. Directed by Daniel Haller, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1967.

1968

The Mini Skirt Mob. Directed by Maury Dexter, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1968.

The Savage Seven. Directed by Richard Rush, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1968.

Angels From Hell. Directed by Bruce Kessler, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1968.

She Devils on Wheels. Directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis, Universal City: Mayflower Pictures, 1968.

The Hellcats. Directed by Robert F. Slatzer, Beverly Hills: Crown International Pictures, 1968.

La Motocyclette (The Girl on a Motorcycle). Directed by Jack Cardiff, Paris: Ares Production, 1968.

1969

Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Run, Angel, Run!. Directed by Jack Starrett, Los Angeles: Fanfare Films, 1969.

Satan's Sadists. Directed by Al Adamson, Los Angeles: Independent International Pictures, 1969.

Hell's Belles. Directed by Maury Dexter, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1969.

The Cycle Savages. Directed by Bill Brame, Los Angeles: Maurice Smith Productions, 1969.

Hell's Angels '69. Directed by Lee Madden, Culver City: American International Pictures, 1969.

Naked Angels. Directed by Bruce D. Clarke, Los Angeles: Favorite Films, 1969.

Wild Wheels. Directed by Ken Osborne, Los Angeles: Fanfare Films, 1969.